

Trotsky and Gramsci: debates on strategy concerning the revolution in the 'West'

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Against a backdrop of capitalist crisis and new developments in the class struggle around the world, it is more than ever necessary to return to the study of revolutionary strategy. With that aim in mind, at the beginning of 2011 the FT organised a seminar to discuss some of the main theoretical concepts of military strategy, and in particular those dealt with in the classic book *On War* by Carl von Clausewitz. Both Lenin and Trotsky – and through them the Third International – had appropriated some key aspects of this book in order to reflect on the strategy of revolutionary Marxism in the imperialist epoch. In our second seminar, which took place in 2012, we focused on the conception of strategy in the Marxism of Leon Trotsky, whose thinking addressed the main strategic questions of the revolution both on the military terrain, as organiser of the Petrograd insurrection and founder of the Red Army, and in the political arena, as leader of the Third and Fourth Internationals.

As part of this debate we present here a counterpoint between the strategic thinking of Leon Trotsky and that of Antonio Gramsci. In *Estrategia Internacional* No.19 we published an article entitled 'Trotsky and Gramsci: convergences and divergences', where we compared the theoretical systems of both revolutionaries. In the present work we will concentrate on their approaches towards the main strategic lessons of the class struggle in Europe during the period between the defeat of the German revolution of 1923 and the rise of Hitler a decade later.

In this article, as well as dealing with the work of Carl von Clausewitz and some of his followers like Hans Delbrück, we will revisit the main polemics and works on strategy – political and military – of Trotsky, Lenin, Marx, Engels, Mehring, Luxemburg and Gramsci. Their thoughts on strategy, forged during great events in the class struggle, have been overlooked over the last decades but are indispensable today when considering problems related to insurrection, civil war, and fighting for proletarian policies in different types of inter-state wars, as well as other key questions – such as how to put forward a revolutionary programme – that we think are the basis for revitalising revolutionary Marxism in the light of the profound changes that have taken place over the last decades.

Trotsky, Gramsci and the strategy for the revolution in the West

Left intellectuals in general, including those who recognise that Trotsky made important contributions to Marxist theory, almost invariably resort to the thesis proposed by Michael Burawoy that says: "Trotsky's analyses were time and again shipwrecked on the rock of the Western proletariat. It would be another Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who would carry Marxism forward, incorporating Trotsky's understandings into a broader interpretation that would try to come to terms with the failure of the revolution in the West."^{1,2}

¹ 'Two methods in search of science: Skocpol versus Trotsky', in *Theory and Society* 18: 759-805, 1989 (p.789).
<http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Methodology/Two%20Methods.T%26S.pdf>

² In the introduction of the new edition of Gramsci's texts during his time in prison, Razmig Keucheyan from the magazine *Contretemps* goes back (to it): "The mistake of Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky was to have kept a concept of the social world, and therefore of the revolutionary strategy, which are previous to the structural changes described by Gramsci, ...([in

The Italian revolutionary developed as one of the central tenets of his thought the question of the conditions for revolution in the West, counter-posing the 'war of position' with the 'war of manoeuvre' in order to explain the failure of the first revolutionary wave of the 20th Century in Europe and the steps necessary in order to confront fascism.

Gramsci and Trotsky's concepts have some points in common, but also many differences of a fundamental nature. As we intend to demonstrate in this article, it would be the founder of the Red Army who would develop a comprehensive outlook on the problems of strategy in the Western countries.

The starting point for this comparison is necessarily located in the German revolution of 1923, a true turning point for revolution in the West, which was at the same time the first great defeat for the Communist International (CI). It marked the beginning of a kind of 'ebb' in strategic thinking in the ranks of the CI and the gradual abandonment of the main conclusions of its first four congresses.

The first steps in this revision took place during the Fifth Congress of the CI over the tactics of the united front and the 'workers' government'.³ This was a consequence of denying the defeat in Germany and refusing to draw its strategic lessons.

Gramsci's underestimation of these polemics and of the lessons of the 1923 German revolution has not been analysed by any of his principal interpreters. However, these debates are crucial for understanding the fundamental problems of revolution in the West in the inter-war period. This gap in the thinking of the Italian revolutionary could be considered to be the most important source of ambiguity in his strategic view, regarding his understanding of the united front, the concept of 'war of position' and many of his formulations of his *Prison Notebooks*.

None of the Trotskyist currents that emerged after the split in the Fourth International in 1953 has revisited this debate in depth in order to understand Trotsky's revolutionary legacy. Rather, there were those who opportunistically tried to use his defence of the workers' government tactic in 1923 to justify subordination to Stalinist and petit-bourgeois leaderships, and to extend support to, and even enter into, bourgeois governments. On the other hand, there were sectarians who interpreted Trotsky's political position in those years as an opportunist error. Many, like Isaac Deutscher, did not give great importance to this part of Trotsky's life because they thought that he had exaggerated the revolutionary possibilities in Germany.

However, his political intervention as a member of the executive committee of the Third International and his conclusions on the events in Germany in 1923 show the real stature of Trotsky as a strategist – matching his intervention in Petrograd six years earlier – and his ability to develop the concept of the united front and the tactic of the workers' government, starting from the establishment of a complex relationship between attack and defence drawn from Carl Clausewitz's best developments. Overall, this would become a key component of his political work and his thoughts on strategy, without which it would be impossible to understand his revolutionary legacy.

particular the differentiation] between the 'east front; and the 'western front', that is between eastern societies still in movement and western societies in which the civil society and the state are totally blend" (Keuchezan, Razmig, in "Machiavel, la politique, le prince modern et les class subalternes", in Antonio Gramsci: Guerre de mouvement et guerre de position, Paris, La fabrique, 2011, p.163)

³ This involution was going to be followed by other chapters (events). In December with the official view of the 'theory' of socialism in one country which would cut the links with the internationalism that had characterised the 3rd International since its foundation; with the call to build 'workers' and peasants' government' – a policy that in China would imply the subordination to the Koumitang and the catastrophe of the revolution in the East. This drift would deepen at the 6th and 7th Congress.

I. The origin of the divergences in the Third International

The united front and the workers' government in the communist international

The two years from May 1922 would be the period of Antonio Gramsci's greatest international political activity. They were key years in the shaping of his political thought, initially during his stay in Russia until December 1923 as a participant in the Fourth Congress of the Communist International and as a delegate to the Executive Committee of the CI for the Italian Communist Party (PCI), and then when he went to Vienna as a functionary of the executive until May 1924.

During that period Gramsci made a fundamental change in his political position. The Italian Communist Party – at that time under the leadership of Amadeo Bordiga – and Gramsci himself formed part of the left wing of the International that had opposed the workers' united front tactic as formulated by the Third Congress of the CI.

After his participation in the Fourth Congress, Gramsci started to appropriate the theses on the united front and the workers' government tactic⁴. At the same time he took the decision to build an alternative inside the PCI to both the Bordiga leadership and the right wing led by Tasca. Thereafter, the united front tactic would acquire more and more weight in his political deliberations until he reached the point in the *Prison Notebooks* where he identified it with the 'war of position', the only possible strategy in the 'West'.

At the Fourth Congress of the CI at the end of 1922, in which Gramsci participated, one of the main issues discussed in addition to the question of revolution in the East was the slogan of the 'workers' government', which necessitated developing the discussion on the united front to a new level.

The 'Resolution on Comintern Tactics' passed by this congress says: "The slogan of a workers' government (or a workers' and peasants' government) can be used practically everywhere as a general agitational slogan. However, *as a central political slogan*, the workers' government is most important in countries where the position of bourgeois society is particularly unstable and where the balance of forces between the workers' parties and the bourgeoisie places the question of government on the order of the day as a practical problem requiring immediate solution. In these countries the workers' government slogan follows inevitably from the entire united front tactic."⁵

Up to then the tactic of the "workers' government" or the "workers' and peasants' government" had referred to the experience of the Bolshevik Party in Russia, which until it won the majority of the soviets maintained the demand that the Mensheviks and the Social-Revolutionaries (SR) should break with the capitalists and the imperialist powers and take the power. In such circumstances the Bolsheviks would commit themselves to defending the government against the bourgeoisie and would not confront it with insurrectional methods, but would refuse to enter into it or to take

⁴ The Fourth Congress was celebrated shortly after that the Italian black shirts *March on Rome*, which allowed Mussolini to start winning power. The leaderships of the main workers organisations proved to be (are) impotent. The necessity to build a defensive united front becomes obvious and that of (for) the ICP to have an active policy towards the sectors of the Italian socialists and workers' organisations in order to confront fascism in the sense (in the lines) of the concept of united front developed by the CI which was opposed by the majority of the Italian delegation.

⁵ Theses on Comintern Tactics, 5 December 1922 in *Resolutions & Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, p.397, Pluto Press, London, 1983). Also in: <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm>

political responsibility for its actions. This tactic had played a key role in increasing the influence of the Bolsheviks and preparing the conditions for the triumphant insurrection, while also contributing to the split in the peasant party (the SRs), allowing – after the October insurrection – the formation of the workers’ and peasants’ government of the Bolsheviks and Left SRs.

The Fourth Congress of the CI goes a step further. With the same goal of developing the revolution, it is possible that under certain conditions of the disintegration of the bourgeois states apparatus, the communists can participate in governments with non-communist parties and workers’ organisations before taking power, in order to help prepare the conditions for the insurrection and win the majority of the working class.

Like the united front, the ‘workers’ government’ tactic included elements of manoeuvre as well as of strategy and tactics⁶. The element related to manoeuvre consisted in the possibility, under conditions of the collapse of the bourgeois state apparatus and with a favourable balance of forces, of forming coalition governments in which revolutionaries would participate alongside non-communist parties and workers’ organisations in order “to rally the proletarians and unleash revolutionary struggle”.⁷ The resolution of the Fourth Congress clearly distinguished this type of workers’ government from liberal or social-democratic workers’ governments, which “are not revolutionary governments, but disguised coalitions between the bourgeoisie and the counter-revolutionary workers’ leaders”⁸. Communists should not participate under any circumstances in the latter type; on the contrary, they “should expose them mercilessly to the masses.”⁹

The temporary alliance envisaged in the ‘workers’ government’ tactic of the IC had precise tactical goals, namely the achievement of certain minimal points that the ‘Theses on Comintern Tactics’ summarise as follows: “The most elementary tasks of a workers’ government must be to arm the proletariat, disarm the bourgeois counter-revolutionary organisations, bringing control over production, shift the main burden of taxation onto the propertied classes and break the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.”¹⁰ The strategic goal, as with the united front, was to win the majority of the working class for revolution as a result of their common experiences or their rejection of their reformist or centrist leaderships.

The Fourth Congress of the Communist International even contemplated the possibility of participating in a ‘workers’ government’ which would emerge out of a parliamentary combination, but always starting from the same strategic objective, that is, to develop the revolutionary movement and the civil war against the bourgeoisie. “Such a workers’ government,” the resolution points out, “is possible only if it is born out of the struggle of the masses and is supported by combative workers’ organisations... However, even a workers’ government that comes about through an alignment of parliamentary forces, i.e., a government of purely parliamentary origin, can give rise to an upsurge of the revolutionary workers’ movement. It is obvious that the formation of a

⁶ Note for EI: in a previous chapter we made the following point about the UF: “in short, we can say that the united front constitutes a complex strategy that has elements of maneuver, as well as tactic and strategy. On one hand, implies agreements – due to the specific relation of forces between the tendencies – with reformist as circumstantial allies (maneuver elements/ aspect), with the aim of unity in the proletarian ranks for partial common battles (tactical elements). On the other hand, as the main goal, the broadening of the influence of revolutionary parties as a result of the common experience (or its rejection by the reformist leadership), in the sense of reducing the ‘strategic reservoir’ for taking power (strategic aspect/ element).

⁷ Op. cit. page 398.

⁸ Resolución sobre la táctica de la Internacional Comunista”, en Los cuatro primeros congresos de la Internacional Comunista, Tomo II, Bs. As., Pluma, p. 209. (own translation)

⁹ Idem (own translation)

¹⁰ Theses on Comintern Tactics, resolution 11, in <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm>

genuine workers' government must lead to a bitter struggle with the bourgeoisie or even to civil war." ¹¹

A few months after the Fourth Congress, a new revolution broke out in Germany, which in October 1923 would pose the concrete possibility of forming workers' governments in the landers of Saxony and Thuringia. It would be the first test and the most audacious implementation of the united front tactic ever put forward by the Communist International.

The formula of the 'workers' government' and the relative value of 'fortresses' in the offensive

Following Germany's failure to pay the full reparations imposed on it by the allies at the end of the First World War, in January 1923 the French Prime Minister, Raymond Poincaré, launched an invasion of the Ruhr region, the heart of the German coal, iron and steel industries, in order to requisition goods in lieu of payment. The consequence for Germany was increasing economic chaos, industrial paralysis, rampant unemployment and hyperinflation, which reignited the revolution. A wave of strikes began in May, factory committees (Betriebsräte) were formed as bodies of self-organisation, 'Proletarian Hundreds' (workers' militias) raided markets and shops in order to get food, and commissions for the control of the price and distribution of food were formed, in particular in the Ruhr area. In August there was a general strike centred on Berlin that overthrew the government of Chancellor Wilhem Cuno, who headed a cabinet of technocrats answering directly to the big industrial and financial bourgeoisie. It was succeeded by a coalition government led by Gustav Stresemann, four of whose ministers were members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In this context the possibility of building 'workers' governments' with the left wing of the SPD existed in both Saxony and Thuringia. A discussion on this issue had already started the year before, in 1922. At that time Trotsky had rejected it as an immediate perspective but left it open as a possibility for when the class struggle deepened, which in fact happened with the opening of the Ruhr crisis.

Addressing a meeting in December 1922, Trotsky said: "If you, our German Communist comrades, are of the opinion that a revolution is possible in the next few months in Germany, then we would advise you to participate in Saxony in a coalition government and to utilise your ministerial posts in Saxony for the furthering of political and organisational tasks and *for transforming Saxony in a certain sense into a Communist drill ground so as to have a revolutionary stronghold already reinforced in a period of preparation for the approaching outbreak of the revolution* [our emphasis]. But this would be possible only if the pressure of the revolution were already making itself felt, only if it were already at hand. In that case it would imply only the seizure of a single position in Germany, which you are destined to capture as a whole. But at the present time you will of course play in Saxony the role of an appendage, an impotent appendage because the Saxon government itself is impotent before Berlin, and Berlin is – a bourgeois government." ¹²

In other words, Trotsky thought that participation in a regional government with the SPD in order to build a revolutionary bastion was a tactic that should only be used in the period of preparation for the insurrection, a period that, for Trotsky, constituted the first moment in the civil war – that is, of the strategic offensive of the proletariat.

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Trotsky, L., 'Report on the Fourth World Congress', *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. 2, New Park, 1974, p.325; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-2/24b.htm>

A similar logic can be found in Clausewitz's evaluation of the role of "fortresses" in the offensive. The Prussian general conceived of only two means of attack in his epoch. Obviously, the first one was armed force, "to which one must of course add any fortresses located close to the theatre of war, which may have a substantial influence on the attack. But this influence will weaken as the advance proceeds; clearly, the attacker's fortresses can never play so prominent a part as the defender's, which often become a main feature".¹³

On October 10, three members of the KPD – Paul Böttcher, Fritz Heckert and Heinrich Brandler – joined the government of Saxony headed by Erich Zeigner, and on October 13, another three members of the KPD – Theodor Neubauer, Albin Tenner and Karl Korsch – joined August Frölich's government in Thuringia.

Two days after the entry of the communists into the government, Zeigner made public his intention to disarm the bourgeois formations and to strengthen the Proletarian Hundreds. As a result, tensions with the army (*Reichswehr*) deepened and General Müller, commander of the Third Military District (*Wehrkreis*), responded by ordering the dissolution of the Proletarian Hundreds and any similar bodies, as well as the immediate surrender of their arms.

In the following days, a congress of Proletarian Hundreds took place in Saxony, but the key question for the KPD leadership was negotiations with the SPD. Meanwhile, the Zeigner government did not carry out any concrete measures to arm the Proletarian Hundreds. On October 19, Chancellor Stresemann demanded the re-establishment of order in Saxony and Thuringia. On the 21st, a conference of factory committees was held in Chemnitz in order to discuss the way forward, but faced with the negativity of the social democrats the meeting was a failure and ended without any call for action. As a result, the KPD retreated and decided to abandon completely the plan for insurrection.¹⁴

For Trotsky, the purpose of entering into 'workers' governments' was to establish 'fortresses' that could be used as a means of prosecuting the offensive, that is, for the strengthening of the factory committees and the Proletarian Hundreds with the aim of preparing the insurrection at a national level under the banner of the defence of the 'workers' government' against the Reichswehr. However, these fortresses became transformed into ends in themselves by the KPD leadership, who abandoned the struggle for the general strike and the insurrection when the left wing of the social democracy opposed these policies. Far from serving as a springboard that would develop the offensive, these 'fortresses' became a dead weight and had the opposite effect.

This line of conciliation went so far as to call on workers to abort the insurrection in Hamburg after a day of relatively successful combat. According to most sources the Hamburg insurrection took place because the KPD resolution calling it off didn't reach the local leadership in time. Events developed after October 21 with an extension of the general strike to enable the insurrection to be called on October 23. The fact that there were no Reichswehr troops stationed in Hamburg meant that the uprising scored important successes during the first hours. Despite having almost no weapons, at dawn the Proletarian Hundreds seized 17 police stations out of the 20 that they had targeted. But poor political preparation meant that the first encounter that the masses had with the insurrection was on the 23rd itself, and soon the insurgents were on the defensive.

However, from the early hours of the morning barricades were built in working class neighbourhoods. In some districts the insurrection was defeated, while in others fierce battles took place; in Schiffbeck the insurgents disarmed the police and retained control for two days. During the

¹³ Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*, Princeton University Press, 1984, p.525.

¹⁴ Cf., Broué, P., *The German Revolution, 1917–1923*, Brill, 2004.

night of October 23-24, Hugo Urbahns gave the order to abort the insurrection. In spite of this, the fighting continued in the city for a few days.¹⁵

Could the Insurrection in Hamburg have triumphed and become a revolutionary bastion for the rest of Germany? It is impossible to say. What we can say is that Hamburg was willing to fight and that it was the base for organising a national plan of insurrection.

In spite of the fact that the German revolution of 1923 has profoundly marked the fate of the international revolutionary movement, it is not generally very well known, let alone studied. As we are trying to demonstrate in this brief summary of some of the events, the KPD didn't orient itself from a strategic point of view, and in our opinion it is here that we have to look for the causes of the defeat.

The tactical objectives of the 'workers' government' policy outlined in the resolutions of the Fourth Congress of the CI were linked to the strategy of making an effective contribution to the organisation of a successful insurrection and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat based on factories committees and the Proletarian Hundreds.

However, as Trotsky pointed out, the 'tactical routine' resulting from the daily struggle to win the masses played a fundamental role in the incapacity of the KPD leadership to make a political turn in line with the developments of the objective situation.

KPD policy was confined within the framework of bourgeois constitutional legality and limited by its confidence in the left wing of social democracy. It was the first great defeat for which the IC was responsible; a revolutionary opportunity had been missed. This was the judgment made by Trotsky on the role of the KPD in October 1923.

Substituting the offensive with entrenchment in 'fortresses'

In contrast with the points developed above, and without making any serious analysis of Trotsky's works, Christine Buci-Glucksmann asserts in her lengthy book *Gramsci and the State* that "to reproduce, under the conditions of advanced capitalist society, a strategy of frontal attack, leads not only to failure, but it also means to fall behind, to fall into economism. And it is economism that marks, for Gramsci, Trotsky's 'Marxism', which cannot avoid mistakes similar to those made by revolutionary syndicalism, that is, the underestimation of the political superstructures..."¹⁶

In this way, the author echoes the academic 'common sense' which is based on a particular interpretation that argues that Gramsci held the view that the main reason for the defeat of the revolution in the West 'in general' was the inability to control specific positions or 'trenches' that Western societies have as a result of their greater development.

On the same line as this 'common sense' view, but with precise political arguments, there is a criticism of Trotsky for overestimating the revolutionary possibilities in 1923 and failing to appreciate the extent of the German working class's illusions in bourgeois democracy. In particular, this expresses itself in Trotsky's omission of an analysis of the Stresemann government and its capacity to derail the revolutionary process thanks to the inclusion of social democratic ministers. The conclusion is that, contrary to Trotsky's opinion, the conditions for the insurrection did not exist.

¹⁵ Cf., Pierre Broué, op. cit.

¹⁶ Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci y el estado*, Siglo XX1. (Own translation)

In similar vein, Mike Jones of the magazine *Revolutionary History* says: “Here Trotsky seems to imply that one could undertake an overturn without the active participation or support of the majority of the workers, or even against them. After all, the numbers within and around the SPD far exceeded those around the KPD, not to speak of those under Christian or other influences. He also disregards the fact that although the reformists were losing ground to Communism in mid-1923, matters were reversed after the arrival of Stresemann. He does not even mention the change of government.”¹⁷

However, Trotsky did analyse the Stresemann government at the time. On October 19, 1923, he posed the question as follows: “The present crisis in Germany has grown out of the occupation of the Ruhr. Stresemann surrendered to French imperialism. But French usurers’ capital did not want to talk with the vanquished. The German bourgeois state is in its death-throes. Essentially, there is no longer a united Germany. Bavaria, with its population of nine millions, is under the rule of moderate Fascism. Saxony, with its population of eight millions, has a coalition government of Communists and Left Social-Democrats. Neither state takes any notice of the central government, of Berlin, where the helpless Stresemann now rules. Parliament has ceded to him its powers, the powers of impotence. Stresemann holds on only because neither the Communist Party nor the Fascists have as yet finally seized power. But the Left Wing of Germany’s political front continues to grow.”¹⁸

As Trotsky said, the evolution of the situation, towards the left in Saxony and Thuringia where a sector of the social democracy formed a common government with the communists, and towards the right in Bavaria where the fascists dominated, showed an increased level of polarisation that continued after the coming to power of Stresemann. In this way the government and the regime acquired a weak Bonapartist character – Kerenskyist if we make an analogy with the Russian Revolution – caught between the mobilisation of the masses, who had engaged in a huge general strike in August, and the counter-revolutionary forces. This took place against the backdrop of the military occupation of part of the country, high inflation, divisions in the middle class, the growth of the KPD in the trade unions, and the phenomenon of self-organisation expressed in the development of factory committees, etc. For Trotsky these developments showed the maturing of the conditions for preparing to take power. Another important factor that confirmed Trotsky’s characterisation was the subsequent Hamburg insurrection, which took place despite being isolated.

Gramsci himself raises the same criticisms of Trotsky’s positions as those made by Jones – although he doesn’t develop them. In a letter to Togliatti, Terracini and others, Gramsci says: “If there were errors, they were committed by the Germans. The Russian comrades, i.e., Radek and Trotsky, made the mistake of believing the confidence tricks of Brandler and company; but in fact even in this case their position was not a right-wing but rather a left-wing one, laying them open to the accusation of putschism.”¹⁹

It is obvious that Gramsci’s suggestion that Trotsky trusted in wrong information doesn’t stand up: Trotsky was very well acquainted with the German working class, had led the Petrograd Soviet in 1905 and 1917 and the October insurrection in 1917, and commanded an army of five million during the Russian civil war. Brandler himself, in an exchange with Isaac Deutscher²⁰ recounts that it was Trotsky who had to spend an entire night convincing him of the correctness of the decision of the leadership of the Communist International to set a date for the insurrection.

¹⁷ <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol3/no1/jones.html>

¹⁸ Leon Trotsky, Report to the Third Moscow Provincial Congress of the All-Russia Union of Metal Workers (1923) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/military/ch25.htm>

¹⁹ In ‘Gramsci to Togliatti, Terracini and others (Vienna, 9 February 1924)’, Gramsci, A., *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1978, p.194.

²⁰ Deutscher I., ‘Record of a discussion with Heinrich Brandler’ in *New Left Review* September-October 1977, 1/105, pp.47-55.

The issue was not about a misunderstanding of the facts, but the consequences that flowed from them. Brandler, for example, considered that if it were necessary to start fighting from a defensive position the struggle was already damned, not that it could be the preparation for going on the offensive. At the same time, he drew a very sharp distinction between workers' struggles for better wages and conditions and those which provided the impulse for taking power; for Brandler the relationship between these two goals seemed to be an impenetrable secret. As a result, Brandler formally accepted the orientation of the party towards the insurrection, but without being completely convinced, something that could not be more dangerous for a leadership about to launch a struggle for power.²¹

As mentioned earlier, Trotsky's strategic thinking was on a different track. Basing himself on the relationships between defence and attack, position and manoeuvre, and the impulse of the masses and conscious preparation, he fought against all form of fatalism. He rejected the view that the Russian experience of military preparation and the development of soviets was the only possible model. In relation to the soviets, in 'The Timetable for Revolution'²² he points out that the conditions for insurrection can be mature even though the bodies of self-organisation are not sufficiently developed, and that in this case the steps for the formation of soviets should be included as part of the pre-insurrectional 'timetable'. The same applies for the arming of the masses, which should be part of the preparations, as well as the primary goal of the insurrection itself.

"Revolution," Trotsky wrote, "possesses a mighty power of improvisation, but it never improvises anything good for fatalists, idlers, and fools. Victory demands correct political orientation, organisation, and the will to deal the decisive blow."²³

II. Divergences between Trotsky and Gramsci

United front and insurrection

The lessons of the defeat in Germany would become a decisive turning point in the strategy of the Communist International and in the history of the united front tactic in particular. Lenin having died a few months earlier and the triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev having started their campaign against Trotsky, the Fifth Congress of the Third International in July 1924 ignored the main lessons of the German Revolution and instead started the revision of the theses of the Third and Fourth Congresses on the united front and workers' government tactics.

At the Fifth Congress, Trotsky was the sole defender of the united front tactic as originally formulated. As he pointed out in relation to Germany: "Zinoviev did not see the catastrophe, and he was not alone. Together with him the whole Fifth Congress simply passed over this greatest defeat of the world revolution. [...] In its resolution, the Congress lauded the ECCI for having: '...condemned the opportunistic conduct of the German Central Committee and, *above all*, its perverted application of the united front tactic during the Saxon government experiment.' This is somewhat like condemning a murderer 'above all' for failing to take off his hat upon entering the home of his victim."²⁴

²¹ Heinrich Brandler and Isaac Deutscher, 'Correspondence between Brandler and Deutscher 1952-9', in *New Left Review* 1/105, September-October 1977.

²² Trotsky, L., 'The Timetable for Revolution', (January 1924) in <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/01/time.htm>

²³ Op. cit.

²⁴ Trotsky, L., *The Third International After Lenin*, New Park, 1974, p.77-78; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti05.htm#p2-05>

The main problem was not the fact that a workers' government had been set up in Saxony – a tactical manoeuvre – but that it had not been used for the benefit of the offensive; the insurrection had not been prepared and the opportunity to take power was lost without a fight. That is, even if the leaders of the German communist party had rejected the formation of coalition governments in Saxony and Thuringia, they would have maintained themselves within the framework of the legality of the bourgeois regime, since they did not fight for taking power. Trotsky was referring to this when he said that to point out that the main mistake was entering the coalition government was like “condemning a murderer ‘above all’ for failing to take off his hat”.

Gramsci didn't make any substantial contribution regarding these debates at the Fifth Congress. Rather, he appropriated its main thesis, which would revise the united front tactic, taking it back to past debates about whether it should be a united front 'from above' or 'from below' and establishing the latter option as the norm. The debate on the workers' government tactic also took a step backwards, moving away from the original formulation in 'Resolution on Tactics'.

Neither did he give great importance to the balance sheet of the defeat in Germany, which had been at the centre of the debate. Months before the Congress, in the letter to Togliatti and Terracini mentioned above, he correctly criticised Brandler's group for not setting themselves the task of developing factory committees and workers' control, and for confining the party within the limits of bourgeois legality. However, he didn't pronounce on the question that, according to Trotsky, was critical, that is, whether it was necessary to go on the offensive or not. Although it rather seems that he agreed with the majority of the Congress that the conditions were not mature enough to prepare for taking the power and that Trotsky's positions were the result of Brandler's bad reports, which had exaggerated the intensity of the events.²⁵

For Trotsky, the main problem was that the leadership of the KPD had proved incapable of making the sharp turn of going on the offensive at the appropriate moment, and that it had been incapable of negotiating the passage from the 'war of position' to the 'war of manoeuvre', to use Gramsci's terms.

Faced with the right wing of the KPD led by Brandler, which at that time had received Stalin's support in restraining rather than unleashing the masses' revolutionary tendencies, Trotsky pointed out that: “At a time when the entire objective situation demanded that the party undertake a decisive blow, the party did not act to organise the revolution but kept awaiting it. [...] In the course of 1923 the working masses realised or sensed that the moment of decisive struggle was approaching. However, they did not see the necessary resolution and self-confidence on the side of the Communist Party. And when the latter began its feverish preparations for an uprising, it immediately lost its balance and also its ties with the masses. [...] ...some comrades hastened to announce that ‘we overestimated the situation; the revolution hasn't matured as yet.’ [...] In reality,

²⁵ In that letter there is an important vindication of Trotsky and even of the theory of Permanent Revolution, however, after the Congress Gramsci would join the campaign of 'bolshevisation', which had the aim of persecuting Trotsky and anyone who sympathised with him. In that regard Trotsky said: “Much has been spoken and written lately on the necessity of “Bolshevizing” the Comintern. This is a task that cannot be disputed or delayed; it is made particularly urgent after the cruel lessons of Bulgaria and Germany a year ago. Bolshevism is not a doctrine (i.e., not merely a doctrine) but a system of revolutionary training for the proletarian uprising.” (*The Lessons of October*, in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition*, Pathfinder Press, 1980, p.256, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/ch8.htm>.) However, the 'bolshevisation' represented all the opposite. It disorganised the leaderships of the different communist parties demanding the automatic alignment with the positions of the ascending bureaucracy of the Russian Communist Party and rejection of 'Trotskyism'. All strategic decisions were banned.

however, *the revolution failed to lead to victory not because it generally 'had not matured' but because the decisive link – the leadership – dropped out of the chain at the decisive moment.*"²⁶

Later Trotsky theorised on this issue and polemicised against those, like Zinoviev at the Fifth Congress, who wanted to reduce everything to the workers' government tactic itself: "In the German defeat of 1923, there were, of course, many national peculiarities but there also were profoundly typical features which indicate a general danger. *This danger may be termed as the crisis of the revolutionary leadership on the eve of the transition to the armed insurrection. The rank and file of the proletarian party are by their very nature far less susceptible to the pressure of bourgeois public opinion. But certain elements of the party tops and the middle stratum of the party will unfailingly succumb in larger or smaller measure to the material and ideological terror of the bourgeoisie at the decisive moment.* [...] To be sure, there is no panacea against it suitable for all cases. But the first necessary step in fighting a peril is to understand its source and its nature."²⁷

At the same time, Trotsky noted how this dynamic was associated with the development of right-wing groups in communist parties in pre-October periods, something that reflects both the difficulties of the 'leap' that the insurrection involves as well as the pressure of bourgeois public opinion on the leadership.²⁸

The lack of a strategic conclusion in this regard, and its substitution by the refutation of the united front tactic itself, would be the source of the adventurism following the Fifth Congress.²⁹ The failure of the leadership of the Communist International to make a serious evaluation of the importance of the defeat in Germany and its lessons constituted for Trotsky the "key strategic mistake of the Fifth Congress".

As will be discussed later, by not giving the necessary weight to Germany in strategic thinking, Gramsci established a continuity between the struggle of the Third and Fourth Congresses of the Communist International on the united front after the 'March Action'³⁰ of 1921 and the battle against the 'third period' line after the Sixth Congress in 1928. What is lost is not only a realistic view of Trotsky's strategic positions, but no less than the crucial discussion around the relationship between 'position' and 'manoeuvre', between united front and insurrection in the 'west'.

²⁶ Trotsky, L., 'Author's 1924 Introduction', *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol.1, New Park, p.3; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/intro.htm> (Our emphasis)

²⁷ Trotsky, L., 'Strategy and Tactics in the Imperialist Epoch', *The Third International after Lenin*, New Park, 1974, p.74; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti04.htm#p2-04> (Our emphasis)

²⁸ As we previously analysed, according to Trotsky at such moments the masses take a more guarded attitude because of their accumulated experience that indicates the impossibility of taking power without a decisive leadership at the helm. Trotsky called it 'the calm before the storm'. The right-wing group that emerges in opposition to the necessity of preparing the insurrection is based on the interpretation of this phenomenon as 'conservatism' of the masses, as a retreat, when in reality it is an expression of something very different, that is, that they have had practical experience of the limits of spontaneity as a means to achieving victory.

²⁹ For example, the launching of the insurrection in Reval, Estonia, at the end of 1924, without taking into account the situation of the masses and the relation of forces, which naturally ended in failure; and the attack on the cathedral in Sofia, Bulgaria.

³⁰ By 1921, the KDP had increased its influence. The left of the USPD, around two-thirds of the active membership, merged with the KPD in order to form the Unified Communist Party (VKPD). In March 1921, in the coal mines in Mansfeld there were strikes and factory occupations and the governor of Saxony, the social democrat Hürsing, sent the army and the police to suppress the movement. The application of the 'theory of the offensive' by the VKPD was to call for an immediate general strike in the entire country and an armed struggle instead of condemning the repression and calling for solidarity from a defensive position, which would probably have been a powerful tool. From March 22 to 29, there was a heroic struggle but there was no response outside the VKPD and the workers of central Germany, and the movement was defeated, leaving many dead and thousands imprisoned. As a consequence, a large number of members left the VKPD.

For Trotsky, the critical issue was not to revise the tactic of the united front, let alone to use it to embark on putschist adventures or to transform it into a strategy to adapt to the left of the social democracy. According to Trotsky, the main conclusion of the Fifth Congress should have been as follows: "These are the extreme dangers from the 'left' and the 'right' – these are the limits between which the policy of the proletarian party generally passes in our epoch. *We shall continue to firmly hope that enriched by battles, defeats and experience the German Communist Party will succeed in the not-so-distant future in guiding its ship between the 'March' Scylla and the 'November' Charybdis and will secure to the German proletariat what the latter has so honestly earned: victory!*"³¹ He also concluded that it was necessary to develop a broad study of insurrection as an art, as a combination of conspiracy and mass action, as he expressed it in his conferences at the Society of Military Sciences in Moscow in July 1924.³²

That was the strategic line that guided Trotsky's position during those years. It was a position that the leadership of the Communist International refused to adopt; and in line with this they would be responsible for the most disastrous turns in the following years, destroying first the 'March' Scylla during the 'third period', which opened the road to the rise of fascism, then the 'November' Charybdis, until arriving at the deep waters of the 'popular front' that drowned the Spanish revolution, paving the way for the Second World War.

Position and manoeuvre in Gramsci

As Clausewitz noted, "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive."³³

In this regard, a balance sheet of the defeat of the German revolution was important not only because it would have provided the possibility of drawing strategic lessons from the process, but also because it would have helped in an assessment of the international situation that had opened. The Fifth Congress saw continuity in the revolutionary process in Germany after November 1923, concluding therefore that the taking of power was on the immediate horizon.

For Trotsky, however, the defeat of the German proletariat opened a period of ebb and relative stabilisation of capitalism, and in this situation it was necessary to bring to the foreground the struggle of the Communist parties to win the masses and prepare once more the conditions for the struggle for power. In reference to this, years later Trotsky wrote: "Without an extensive and generalised dialectical comprehension of the present epoch as an epoch of abrupt turns, a real education of the young parties, a correct strategical leadership of the class struggle, a correct combination of tactics, and above all, a sharp and bold and decisive re-arming at each successive breaking point of the situation are impossible."³⁴

At the beginning of 1924, Gramsci appears to be on the same wavelength as Trotsky regarding the distancing of the immediate possibility of revolution and the need to bring to the fore the struggle to win influence among the masses in order to prepare the conditions for power. However, Gramsci did

³¹ Trotsky, L., 'Author's 1924 Introduction', *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol.1, op. cit., p.8; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/intro.htm> (Our emphasis)

³² Cf., Trotsky, L., 'Problems of Civil War', *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-25)*, Pathfinder Press, 1975, pp.175-198.

³³ Clausewitz, op. cit., p.88.

³⁴ Trotsky, L., 'Strategy and Tactics in the Imperialist Epoch', *The Third International After Lenin*, op. cit., p.65; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti04.htm#p2-04>

not reach this conclusion on the basis of the defeat of the German working class, but because of the more general characteristics that differentiate the 'east' from the 'west': "The determination, which in Russia was direct and drove the masses onto the streets for a revolutionary uprising, in central and western Europe is complicated by all these political superstructures, created by the greater development of capitalism. This makes the action of the masses slower and more prudent, and therefore requires of the revolutionary party a strategy and tactics altogether more complex and long-term than those which were necessary for the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November 1917."³⁵

Here we find one of the most fundamental differences between the two revolutionaries. For Trotsky, who had drawn the correct lessons of the German Revolution of 1923, what the parties of the Third International had to understand – even those in the 'west' – was that "it was an epoch of abrupt turns". For Gramsci, who had not made such an in-depth study of the balance sheet of the German events, the conclusion was of more 'general' character, that is, that the existence of more solid superstructures in the 'west' made the "actions of the masses slower and more cautious". This conclusion would later become the basis for his later thoughts developed in *Prison Notebooks*.

It is important to stress that although Trotsky and Gramsci agreed that the political superstructures in the 'west' were much more complex than those in the 'east', they drew different strategic conclusions from this fact. Gramsci himself stressed in the *Prison Notebooks* the comparison made by Trotsky between 'east' and 'west' at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International: "One attempt to begin a revision of the current tactical methods was perhaps that outlined by L. Dav. Br. [Trotsky] at the fourth meeting, when he made a comparison between the Eastern and Western fronts. The former had fallen at once, but unprecedented struggles had then ensued; in the case of the latter, the struggles would take place 'beforehand'. The question, therefore, was whether civil society resists before or after the attempt to seize power; where the latter takes place, etc."³⁶

Indeed, in the discourse to which Gramsci refers, Trotsky argued: "The ease with which we conquered power on November 7, 1917, was paid for by the countless sacrifices of the Civil War. In countries that are older in the capitalist sense, and with a higher culture, the situation will, without doubt, differ profoundly. [...] The more difficult and gruelling the struggle for state power, all the less possible will it be to challenge the proletariat's power after the victory."³⁷

The basis for this reasoning was that, for Gramsci, 'civil society' in the 'west' resists more before the assault than after, while in the 'east' the opposite occurs. But the Italian revolutionary, after pointing out Trotsky's analysis, immediately goes on to say: "However, the question was outlined only in a brilliant, literary form, without directives of a practical character."³⁸

This statement could not be further from the truth, as is evidenced by Trotsky's interventions at the Fourth Congress, from which Gramsci took the quote, or by the report on the United Front tactic in France for the Executive Committee of the CI in February-March 1922, or later, as we have seen, by the debates on the German revolution of 1923, or by other instances that Gramsci must have known about. In reality, the key to understanding the question lies in the fact that Gramsci's idea of 'practical directives' differed from those held by Trotsky.

³⁵ 'Gramsci to Togliatti, Terracini and others', op. cit., pp.199-200..

³⁶ Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p.236.

³⁷ Trotsky, L., 'The New Economic Policy of Soviet Russia and the Perspectives of the World Revolution', *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol.2, op. cit., p.221; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-2/20.htm>

³⁸ Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, op. cit., p.236.

In the case of Gramsci, the differences between the development of the revolution in Western Europe and Russia led him to establish an opposition between two differentiated strategies, the 'war of manoeuvre' for the 'East' and the 'war of position' for the 'West'. With the 'war of position', the leader of the PCI referred to the style of warfare characterised by the positioning of contending armies along static trench lines, which was most widely developed during the First World War. Within this scheme, 'manoeuvring' was generally identified with the attack upon enemy positions.³⁹

In 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', Perry Anderson points out how this theoretical scheme of the 'war of position' and the 'war of manoeuvre' largely reproduces the scheme elaborated by Karl Kautsky, applying the concepts of the 'strategy of attrition' and the 'strategy of annihilation'⁴⁰ set forth by military historian Hans Delbrück. However, Gramsci based his position on much more recent debates within the Communist International. We are referring to the different strategies for the 'East' and the 'West' developed by Pannekoek and Gorter⁴¹, among others, a framework adopted by all of the Communist International's leftist wing, of which the Bordiga-led Italian section was a part.

In his opposition to Bordiga in 1924, Gramsci inverted the terms of the leftists' scheme.⁴² The West ceased to be the place where the working class, in Gorter's words, imposed itself "by the strength of its numbers"⁴³, and became a place where "mass action becomes slower and more prudent". This inherited scheme which mechanically contrasted the strategies for the 'East' and the 'West, far from being an anchor for Gramsci, would first be a source of political eclecticism⁴⁴, and years later, a source of theoretical simplifications.

³⁹It should be noted that the term 'manoeuvre' can also have a different meaning in military literature, as employed in various parts of this book, in contrast with 'combat'. In this sense, it is characteristic of Clausewitz to distinguish between the supremacy of manoeuvring in 18th Century wars to gain minor positional advantages that make it possible to negotiate a favourable peace without entering combat, and the Napoleonic wars in which forces are tested and great battles take precedence.

⁴⁰In response to Rosa Luxemburg, Kautsky identifies the 'strategy of attrition' with the defence of the 'tried and true tactic' of parliamentarism in contrast with direct action and the general strike. In previous chapters, we pointed out how this debate specifically dealt with the questions of how to rally the German working class behind Social Democracy, how to lead sectors that were neither organized in the SPD nor the Social Democratic unions, especially the Catholic workers referred to in *Deutsche Zentrumspartei*. Kautsky believed that these sectors had to be led via electoral campaigning and parliamentary representatives. Rosa Luxemburg correctly pointed out how the 'strategy of attrition' according to Kautsky was *Nichtsalsparlamentarismus* ('nothing more than parliamentarism'). That is to say, how the theorist of Germany's Social Democracy rejected the prospect of revolution in favour of elaborating a strategy of occupying positions within the limits of a bourgeois regime. In Gramsci's case, the issue was different insofar as the strategy for a 'war of position' corresponding to the 'West' was assimilated – as we will explain in this article – into the united front formula elaborated by the Third International. However, it is striking that in his *Prison Notebooks*, the Italian revolutionary, just as Kautsky had also done, contrasts this with Rosa Luxemburg's view, although in this case with the aim of comparing the 'war of position' to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. As we will see, although we cannot assimilate Gramsci's theory with Kautsky's, its ambiguities invited comparable revisionism from Togliatti and those who followed in attempts to use it as a basis for reformist strategies that contrasted with Gramsci's own revolutionary life.

⁴¹Both of them representatives of the 'leftist' wing of the Third International, to whom Lenin dedicated his pamphlet, 'Left-wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder'.

⁴²Gramsci pointed out that Bordiga "thinks that the tactic of the International reflects the Russian situation [...] For him, this tactic is extremely voluntaristic and theatrical, because only with an extreme effort of will was it possible to obtain from the Russian masses a revolutionary activity which was not determined by the historical situation. He thinks that for the more developed countries of central and western Europe, this tactic is inadequate or even useless." (Gramsci, A., 'Letter to Togliatti, Terracini and Others, op. cit., p.199).

⁴³Gorter, H., "Open Letter to Comrade Lenin", in <http://www.marxists.org/archive/gorter/1920/open-letter/>

⁴⁴On the one hand, in Italy – which would be excluded from this binary scheme under the label of 'peripheral capitalism' – he would essentially uphold a 'grassroots' united front tactic in accordance with the guidelines set forth in the theses of the Fifth Congress. On the other hand, in the case of Great Britain – included within the realm of the 'West' – he would defend an opportunistic position in favour of maintaining the subordination of the British proletariat to the bureaucracy of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) at all costs, noting in August 1926 that "despite the indecision, weakness and if you like betrayal of the English left during the general strike, the Anglo-Russian Committee should be maintained." (Gramsci, A., *Selections from Political Writings 1921-26*, op. cit., p.411.) This eclecticism would coincide with the zig-zagging policy of the Communist International under Zinoviev's leadership.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, when pointing out the particularities of the revolution in the 'West', Gramsci maintained that "The massive⁴⁵ structure of modern democracies, both in terms of state organisations or a complex of civil associations, is to the art of politics what 'trenches' and permanent fortifications are to the war of position: the element of movement that was once the 'totality' of the war is rendered 'partial'."⁴⁶

In Trotsky's view, this was the point in which problems of strategy simply began; the core issue was how to use these 'fortifications'. We should also add, as Anderson correctly pointed out in his critique of Gramsci, that in imperialist democracies, the bourgeoisie not only relies on greater mechanisms of 'consensus' and co-option, but also on a greater degree of efficiency in its repressive capacity.⁴⁷

Trotsky also elaborated on the differences between the state in the 'West' and in the 'East', although he did not assign an absolute nature to these. Neither the 'massive structure' of modern democracies nor the greater efficiency of the repressive apparatus were considered unchanging phenomena. In differentiating between the revolution in Russia and Western countries, he pointed out, "It was an enormous advantage to us that we were preparing to overthrow a regime which had not yet had time to consolidate itself. The extreme instability and want of assurance of the February state apparatus facilitated our work in the extreme by instilling the revolutionary masses and the party itself with self-assurance. [...] The proletarian revolution in the West will have to deal with a completely established bourgeois state. But this does not mean that it will have to deal with a stable state apparatus; for the very possibility of proletarian insurrection implies an extremely advanced process of the disintegration of the capitalist state."⁴⁸

For this reason, Trotsky considered that the stabilisation resulting from the 1923 defeat was only relative. It was rooted in the class struggle and not in the general characteristics of certain imperialist countries. The fundamental issue was therefore the preparation of Communist parties and their leaderships for sudden situational changes that would pose the need for rapid shifts from a defensive to an offensive position, and vice versa.

Two conceptions of the United Front

With regard to the transition from the war of manoeuvre to the war of position, Gramsci noted, "This seems to me to be the most important question of political theory that the post-war period has posed, and the most difficult to solve correctly. It is related to the problems raised by Bronstein [Trotsky], who in one way or another can be considered the political theorist of frontal attack in a period in which it only leads to defeats."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ We use the Spanish translation by Valentino Gerratana. José Aricó translates it as "The solid structure of modern democracies". The original Italian text says, "*La struttura massiccia delle democrazie moderne, sia come organizzazioni statali che come complesso di associazioni nella vita civile costituiscono per l'arte politica come le 'trincee' e le fortificazioni permanenti del fronte nella guerra di posizione: essi rendono solo 'parziale' l'elemento del movimento che prima era 'tutta la guerra ecc.'*"

⁴⁶ Gramsci, A., *Cuadernos de la Cárcel*, Tomo 5, p.22. (Own translation).

⁴⁷ In this sense, in contrast with the 'social democratic' interpretations of Gramsci, Anderson stated that the capitalist state was "*stronger* than the Tsarist State, because it rested not only on the *consent of the masses*, but also on a *superior repressive apparatus*." Anderson, P., op. cit., p.53.

⁴⁸ Trotsky, L., 'The Lessons of October', op. cit., p.247-248; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/ch7.htm>

⁴⁹ Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, op. cit., p.238.

Trotsky was not only far from being the ‘theorist of the frontal attack’, he had also sharply opposed those who held the view that going on the offensive was the only tactic that revolutionaries could legitimately adopt. Trotsky carried out these debates both in the military sphere during the Russian Civil War as well as the political sphere during the Third and Fourth Congresses of the Communist International. However, as the above quote indicates, what remains unclear is the role of the attack in Gramsci’s theory if we exclude it from an entire period “in which it only leads to defeats”.

For Gramsci, the ‘war of position’ that predominated in the ‘west’ corresponded to the formula of the united front that the Third International had developed in its Third and Fourth Congresses, although it was progressively transformed into a strategy. Gramsci wrote: “It seems to me that Ilitch [Lenin] understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only form possible in the West – where, as Krasnov observes, armies could rapidly accumulate endless quantities of munitions, and where the social structures were of themselves still capable of becoming heavily-armed fortifications. This is what the formula of the ‘United Front’ seems to me to mean...”⁵⁰

Trotsky was not a ‘theorist of the frontal attack’ in general, although, like Clausewitz, he believed that defence – which necessarily implies ‘skilfully delivered blows’ – could only serve to modify the relation of forces in favour of the defender, and open the possibility of going on the attack. In class struggle terms, we could say that while the bourgeoisie aims to ‘preserve’ – *beati sunt possidentes*,⁵¹ as Clausewitz puts it – the proletariat necessarily aims to conquer, first a new State, but also new social relations.

For Trotsky, the defensive united front was not an end in itself, but the condition needed in order to go on the offensive for the seizure of power. At a particular moment in the relation of forces, the defensive united front should move over onto the offensive; that is to say, go beyond the limits of the bourgeois regime with the aim of destroying it. The organisational form of this offensive united front was precisely, in Trotsky’s view, the Soviets, or the soviet-style organisations that the working class had forged in its struggle. The transition to the offensive also marked the beginning of the civil war in broad terms, the start of the preparation for the insurrection.⁵²

This transition, as we have pointed out, is what remains ambiguous in Gramsci’s strategic considerations. In the thoughts set down in his *Prison Notebooks*, both the issue of the workers’ councils – which cost the Gramsci of *L’Ordine Nuovo* so dear – and that of insurrection practically disappeared. However, according to Athos Lisa’s report to the Italian Communist Party in 1933, during his imprisonment Gramsci had told Lisa that “The Party’s aim is the violent seizure of power, the dictatorship of the proletariat...”⁵³

The same ambiguity would reappear in relation to democratic slogans. On the ‘constituent assembly’, Lisa reports that Gramsci says the following: “In Italy, revolutionary perspectives should encompass two alternatives, that is to say, the most likely and the least likely. At this moment, for me, the most likely alternative is that of a period of transition, and therefore it should be this that guides the party’s tactics, without worrying about not appearing

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.237.

⁵¹ Blessed are those who possess.

⁵² Cf., ‘Problems of Civil War’, in Trotsky, L., *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-25)*, Pathfinder, 1980, p.175.

⁵³ Report sent by Athos Lisa to the PCI: Political discussion with Gramsci in Prison, in <http://www.gramsci.org.ar/8/53.htm> (Own translation)

revolutionary enough. The party should make the slogan of the 'constituent assembly' its own, before all the other parties engaged in the struggle against fascism, not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end."⁵⁴

Trotsky also upheld democratic slogans such as the Constituent Assembly, for example, in the case of China. He even proposed the slogan of a 'single assembly' for France in 1934, with the abolition of the senate and the presidency of the Republic. "We are thus firm partisans of a Workers' and Peasants' State," Trotsky wrote, "which will take the power from the exploiters. To win the majority of our working-class allies to this programme is our primary aim. Meanwhile, as long as the majority of the working class continues on the basis of bourgeois democracy, we are ready to defend it with all our forces against violent attacks from the Bonapartist and fascist bourgeoisie." He continued: "However, we demand from our class brothers who adhere to 'democratic' socialism that they be faithful to their ideas, that they draw inspiration from the ideas and methods not of the Third Republic but of the Convention of 1793."⁵⁵

Trotsky did not reduce the alternatives presented by the Italian situation after the triumph of fascism to 'fascism or socialism', nor did he exclude the possibility of transitional periods. But he did point out, as he stated in his letter to the Italian Left Opposition, that it was necessary to be precise about the character of that transition. His theory is precisely that of the transition to the proletarian revolution. "Does this mean that Italy cannot, for a certain time, again become a parliamentary state or become a 'democratic republic'? I consider – in perfect agreement with you, I think – that this eventuality is not excluded. But then it will not be the fruit of a bourgeois revolution, but the abortion of an insufficiently matured and premature proletarian revolution. In the event of a profound revolutionary crisis and mass battles in the course of which the proletarian vanguard will not have been in a position to take power, it may be that the bourgeoisie will restore its rule on 'democratic' bases."⁵⁶

In other words, *Trotsky believed that if a 'democratic' stage existed, it would necessarily arise from the defeat of the proletarian revolution. This relationship is not fully established in Gramsci's theory, and neither is the relationship between the defensive united front and the insurrectional offensive from a strategic point of view.*

Position and manoeuvre in Trotsky

One of Trotsky's distinctive traits as a strategist was that, rejecting all passivity and fatalism, he always sought tactically to place the revolutionary forces on the offensive, even during the preparation of the strategic offensive, that is to say, the insurrection. In October 1917, under the cover of the soviets' conciliatory leadership and through the Revolutionary Military Committee, Trotsky instigated the arming of the proletariat and the winning over of the barracks. Under the banner of the defence of Petrograd, he elaborated the plan for the insurrection, arranging the seizure of power to coincide with the session of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets in which the Bolsheviks were already a majority.

However, Trotsky himself refused to generalise this example. While leading the Red Army, he argued that the civil war in the 'west' would have a more positional character than Russia, where manoeuvre predominated due to its backwardness and the vastness of its territory.

⁵⁴ Ibid. (Own translation)

⁵⁵ Trotsky, L., 'A Programme of Action for France', in: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/06/paf.htm>

⁵⁶ Trotsky, L., *Writings 1930*, Pathfinder, 1975, p.223.

As for the conditions for insurrection, he considered it improbable that those existing in Petrograd in October 1917 – a regime that was not fully developed, the generalised arming of the masses, and the high level of development of the soviets – would repeat themselves.

It is the same strategic thinking that led Trotsky to support the policy of entering the government of Saxony and Thuringia in 1923. In the context of the enormous social crisis in the Ruhr region, he thought the conditions were ripe for the insurrection due to the regime's state of decomposition and the willingness of the masses to take action. He didn't accept the lack of sufficient arms, as argued by Brandler, or the underdevelopment of the soviet bodies as objections to starting the preparation for the offensive. These were tasks that a revolutionary leadership worthy of the name must deal with.

Rather than passively await the emergence of conditions analogous to those of the 'Russian model', Trotsky put forward the bold tactic of the workers' government as part of an active policy of preparing for the insurrection. This 'trench' had to serve for the arming of the proletariat and developing the factory committees and Proletarian Hundreds into a network of self-organisation and self-defence bodies, regardless of their name. Both tasks had to be developed in the heat of the preparations for the offensive, and as an integral part of it.

At the same time, the German workers could not mechanically apply the Russian Revolution model and hope to conquer power in Berlin, expecting power to be seized in the rest of the Länder by a domino effect. This scenario, which in itself simplifies the way in which the Russian Revolution spread after Petrograd, was unlikely in Germany, where each Land had hundreds of years of history before their late unification in 1871. On the contrary, one possibility was to take advantage of the weak links of Saxony and Thuringia, where the army had fewer units in comparison to Berlin and other places, with the aim of turning each of them into 'a revolutionary bastion during a preparation period for the next revolutionary uprising'.

The plan, which never materialised, was based on the assumption that both workers' governments – which essentially agreed on the arming of the proletariat and the disarming of the counter-revolutionary detachments – would be intolerable for the central government. And that indeed was the case, because from the beginning the threat of military intervention was posed. The plan was to use insurrection to lure the army and the reactionary forces to Saxony and Thuringia, while at the same time calling for a general strike and an insurrection in the rest of Germany under the slogan of the defence of the 'bastions of the revolution'. In other words, adopting a defensive tactical position in order to unleash a strategic offensive on a national scale. The Hamburg insurrection would have been a part of this general plan, but it was crushed due to its isolation.

Just as Gramsci systematised his theory on the relationship between position and manoeuvre in his *Prison Notebooks*, Trotsky would do the same in the *Transitional Programme*. With regards to the tactic of a 'workers' government', the practical formulation elaborated in 1923 became part of a more general definition which clearly established the relationship between this tactic and revolutionary strategy in any of its concrete variants.

As Trotsky wrote in the *Transitional Programme*, "The slogan 'workers' and farmers' government' is thus acceptable to us only in the sense that it had in 1917 with the Bolsheviks, i.e., as an anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist slogan, but in no case in that 'democratic' sense which the epigones later gave it, transforming it from a bridge to socialist

revolution into the chief barrier upon its path.”⁵⁷ In other words, the only strategic objective that is implied in the formula of a ‘workers’ government’ – and likewise, that of a ‘workers’ and peasants’ government’ – is that of increasing the revolutionary forces in order to go on the offensive against the bourgeoisie and capitalism. It is always a tactical slogan without any independent value beyond that strategic objective, which, Trotsky stressed, can be achieved in various ways, with or without the emergence of this type of government.

On the one hand, the slogan’s educational value for the masses, who don’t yet see the need for a dictatorship of the proletariat, but who want their traditional leaderships to seize power from the bourgeoisie, would allow revolutionaries to accelerate this experience and consequently increase their influence to the detriment of conciliatory parties. As Trotsky points out, “the demand of the Bolsheviks, addressed to the Mensheviks and the SRs – ‘Break with the bourgeoisie, take the power into your own hands!’ – had for the masses tremendous educational significance. The obstinate unwillingness of the Mensheviks and SRs to take power, so dramatically exposed during the July Days, definitely doomed them before mass opinion and prepared the victory of the Bolsheviks.”⁵⁸

On the other hand, Trotsky wrote, “If the Mensheviks and the SRs had actually broken with the Cadets (liberals) and with foreign imperialism, then the ‘workers’ and peasants’ government’ created by them could only have hastened and facilitated the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”⁵⁹ In other words, had the Bolsheviks’ tactical proposition materialised, they would have been better positioned to fight for a revolutionary programme within the soviets.

In both cases, the aim was to modify the balance of power in favour of revolutionaries so as to prepare the conditions for an offensive. It was for this reason that, from September 1917, when Bolshevik influence was growing exponentially after the conciliatory leaderships had shown no interest in seizing power, the Bolsheviks did not wait to see whether a ‘workers’ and peasants’ government’ would materialise, but instead advanced as a party towards preparing the insurrection. Had this transition from a war of position to a war of manoeuvre not been made, the tactic would have been transformed into its opposite, thereby ceasing to be a ‘bridge to socialist revolution’ in order to become the ‘main obstacle in its path’.

Nevertheless, after the triumph of the October insurrection and the split in the peasant party, the Bolsheviks once again proposed the tactic of a ‘workers’ and peasants’ government’ to the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, establishing a coalition government in order to consolidate the power which had just been seized. But it never ceased to be a tactic subordinated to the advance towards the dictatorship of the proletariat. Attempts were made to maintain that coalition – which formally lasted until the resignation of the Left SR ministers in March 1918, but continued to a certain extent until the middle of the year – but without suspending the tasks of the moment, such as going on the defensive in the military arena by signing a peace treaty with Germany, and going on the offensive internally by addressing the nationalisation of production.

This same dynamic relationship between position and manoeuvre was developed by Trotsky for Germany in 1923, but under different conditions. While observing that the bourgeoisie

⁵⁷ Trotsky, L., *The Transitional Programme for Socialist Revolution*, Pathfinder Press, 1977, p.134; in <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text2.htm#wg>

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.133.

and the state in the 'west' deployed the greatest degree of resistance before power is seized, and that the influence gained by the KPD in certain regions made it an indispensable factor in the creation of a 'workers' government', Trotsky proposed a bold implementation of this tactic with the aim of conquering 'revolutionary bastions' in the preparation of the offensive.

But, as we have attempted to demonstrate, Trotsky's policy towards the German revolution was only one shining example of what defined him as a strategist. Overall, the discussion on the role of the 'workers' government' tactic by Trotsky demonstrated the relationship between defence and attack in all its complexity, as well as the dynamic combination of position and manoeuvre which characterised his strategic thinking.

III. Points of convergence

The use of 'fortresses' in defence

In the context of the failure of the Anglo-Russian Committee, the crushing of the Chinese revolution,⁶⁰ the defeat of the Joint Opposition, and the development of Stalin's confrontation with Bukharin,⁶¹ the Communist International adopted the policy of class against class in 1928⁶², which lasted until shortly after Hitler's rise to power in Germany. The global capitalist crisis which broke out in October 1929 would have catastrophic consequences for the masses.

⁶⁰ After the Fifth Congress and the failure of the putschist ventures in Estonia and Bulgaria, the zigzagging orientation of the Communist International made another turn. By 1925, the agreement with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) had been consolidated, creating the Anglo-Russian Committee on the basis of solidarity with the USSR. However, this agreement at a trade union level, far from becoming a means for increasing Communist strength in Great Britain and reducing the Soviet Union's isolation, instead shackled the British Communists who ended up becoming the left cover for the TUC bureaucracy's betrayal of the general strike in 1926. In the period of time between the establishment of the agreement and the betrayal in 1926, the Communist International's leadership exaggerated the 'shift to the left' of the TUC leadership, disarming the British proletariat which in those years was waging the greatest struggle since Chartism. The same occurred in China, where the ECCI led the CPC to subordinate itself to the Kuomintang with the catastrophic consequences for the Chinese Revolution which we will analyse later. However, neither the dissolution of the Anglo-Russian Committee nor the break away from the Kuomintang occurred on the Communist International's initiative, despite the fact that it was obvious that this policy had led to defeat. The TUC leadership abandoned the Committee in 1927 when it no longer served its purposes, since the Communist International had already served it in 1926 and the movement had been defeated. The same occurred with the Kuomintang, which, after the Communist International had agreed on disarming in Shanghai in 1927, considered the agreement 'surpassed' and proceeded to repress the Communists; this, however, was not enough to stop the Communist International from once again trusting in the 'left wing' of the Kuomintang to lead the revolution to its final defeat.

⁶¹ In 1926, various shifts occurred within the Communist Party of the USSR and the leadership remained in the hands of Stalin and Bukharin. But at the same time, discontent spread among the workers of the Soviet Union, especially in the great cities such as Leningrad. One expression of this discontent was Zinoviev's abandonment of Kamenev and Stalin's policy (after having led the anti-Trotskyist campaign in the Fifth Congress), and his leaning towards Trotsky and the Left Opposition. In April 1926, the United Opposition was created and would wage a struggle until Zinoviev and Kamenev's capitulation in 1927. Both had been expelled, along with Trotsky, from the party leadership in October and later from the party itself after the demonstrations and clashes on the tenth anniversary of the Revolution. After the defeat of the United Opposition, the factional struggle resumed between Stalin and Bukharin.

⁶² The ninth plenum of the ECCI in February, 1928, after the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in July, and the tenth plenum held a month later, would lay the foundations for the 'class-against-class' policy also known as the 'Third Period'.

Given that Gramsci had ceased to develop his strategic thinking beyond the discussions against the ultra-left in 1921 and 1922, and considering that the Communist International's leadership had regressed to the level of the leftists of that period,⁶³ the foundations were laid for the convergence between Trotsky and Gramsci in opposition to the Stalinist 'third period'.

The defeats in Great Britain and China had left the revolutionary proletariat on the defensive. When the crisis of 1930 erupted, the proletariat had begun to recover, but as Germany demonstrated, while Communist influence grew arithmetically, fascist influence grew exponentially.⁶⁴

It was vital for the German working class to adopt the tactic of the workers' united front. Unlike the German revolution of 1923, in which the united front was proposed to prepare an insurrectional offensive, the aim of the united front was now defence.

On this point – the importance of the defensive united front – Trotsky and Gramsci had many points of agreement. Both of them believed that the highest developments of 'civil society' – in Gramscian terms – in the West presented a series of 'trenches' that the proletariat could use in its struggle, especially given the advance of fascism. In contrast, Stalin and the leadership of the Communist International, basing themselves on the albeit correct view that the bourgeois state always maintains the same class character despite the various political regimes it can adopt, refused to acknowledge any difference between bourgeois democracy and fascism. There was no 'trench' that the proletariat needed to defend, because it was an all-out struggle of the KPD against fascism. The SPP and the Nazis (NSDAP) were considered different variants of fascism, and the term 'social-fascism' was reserved for social democracy. While this definition ruled out any chance of demanding a united front with the SPD, it also reduced the importance of the NSDAP's advance as a threat to the working class as a whole.

Whether or not these 'trenches' existed was not a minor issue. In his work, *On War*, Clausewitz pointed out that where defence was concerned, "strengthening the theatre of operations, by fortresses, with all they involve" was nothing less than one of the "main factors in strategic effectiveness", giving the defender an advantage over the attacker.⁶⁵ For the attacking army, he said, "The larger the area of operations that it must traverse, the more it is weakened – by the effect of marches and by the detachment of garrisons. The defending army, on the other hand, remains intact. It benefits from its fortresses, nothing depletes its strength, and it is closer to its sources of supply."⁶⁶ Acknowledging the importance of these fortresses was of crucial importance to the struggle.

Likewise, Gramsci maintained that while fascism expects to advance across the trenches of civil society as the form of organization of an 'extended State',⁶⁷ the proletariat must defend them. Paradoxically, within the context of his isolation in the fascist prisons, Gramsci developed this point in a polemic with none other than Trotsky, who at the time was the

⁶³ In contrast with the leftism of the first years of the Communist International, this strategic regression of Stalinism was done to support a policy which was functional to the interests of Moscow's bureaucracy, while the policy of the leftists in Germany, Holland or Italy during the early 1920s was, at least, an expression of the infantile search for a path to revolution.

⁶⁴ In the September elections of 1930, the Communist Party had gone from 3,300,000 votes two years before to 4,600,000, while the NSDAP had gone from 800,000 votes to 6,400,000.

⁶⁵ Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*, Princeton University Press, 1984, p.363.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.365.

⁶⁷ Cf., Buci-Glucksmann, C., *op. cit.*, p.383.

greatest advocate of this point of view against the Communist International's leadership. Gramsci stated, in order to make a distinction with the Russian Revolution: "It should be seen whether Bronstein's famous theory about the *permanent* character of the movement is not the political reflection of the theory of war of manoeuvre (recall the observation of the Cossack general Krasnov) – i.e., in the last analysis, a reflection of the general-economic-cultural-social conditions in a country in which the structures of national life are embryonic and loose, and incapable of becoming 'trench or fortress'."⁶⁸

However, Trotsky would be the one to develop this point most clearly along with Gramsci. In his pamphlet *What Next?*, he stated: "After fascism is victorious, finance capital gathers into its hands, as in a vice of steel, directly and immediately, all the organs and institutions of sovereignty, the executive, administrative, and educational powers of the state: the entire state apparatus together with the army, the municipalities, the universities, the schools, the press, the trade unions, and the cooperatives. [...] it means, primarily and above all, that the workers' organisations are annihilated..."⁶⁹ Later in the same article, in a polemic against Stalinism, he added: "In the course of many decades, the workers have built up within the bourgeois democracy, by utilising it, by fighting against it, their own strongholds and bases of *proletarian democracy*: the trade unions, the political parties, the educational and sport clubs, the cooperatives, etc. The proletariat cannot attain power within the formal limits of bourgeois democracy, but can do so only by taking the road of revolution: this has been proved both by theory and experience. And these bulwarks of workers' democracy within the bourgeois state are absolutely essential for taking the revolutionary road."⁷⁰

The points of agreement between Trotsky and Gramsci were also expressed in the fact that both thinkers used the Italian experience with the rise of Mussolini and the discussion with Bordiga's leftist movement as a starting point from which to analyse fascism. Although the international debates had evolved a great deal over time, the position sustained by PCI leader Amadeo Bordiga would be a constant until the Fifth Congress within the International's debates, until debate was no longer allowed, coinciding with Bordiga's incarceration by Mussolini. Even in the Fifth Congress, where Zinoviev charged against the united front tactic, Bordiga criticised his opening speech as he considered it a very moderate rebuttal against a right-wing tactic.⁷¹ And this was Gramsci's most persistent debate within the PCI leadership. In Gramsci's view, the 'class-against-class' tactic was like a reformulation of Amadeo Bordiga's positions on an international scale.⁷²

Trotsky believed the same. "The leadership of the German Communist Party," he wrote in 1932, "reproduces today almost literally the position from which the Italian Communists took their point of departure: fascism is nothing else but capitalist reaction; from the point of view of the proletariat the differences between diverse types of capitalist reaction are meaningless."⁷³ And he later stated: "Thaelmann's position in 1932 reproduces Bordiga's in 1922."⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Gramsci, A., *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, op. cit., p.236.

⁶⁹ Trotsky, L., *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, Pathfinder Press, 1971, p.155.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp.158-9. Also at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next01.htm#s2>

⁷¹ This position was worsened by the very genesis of the PCI in the Congress of Livorno, where revolutionaries were unable to retain most of the old Socialist Party. That is to say, they were a minority from the beginning, and the United Front tactic was a necessity imposed on them from the very start of their activity as an independent party.

⁷² Bordiga would be one of the leaders of the Communist International who would defend party democracy and oppose the anti-Trotskyist campaign.

⁷³ Trotsky, L., *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, op. cit., p.192.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 193.

For Trotsky, as for Gramsci, it was evident that “There are no ‘class distinctions’ between democracy and fascism. [...] The ruling class, however, does not inhabit a vacuum. It stands in definite relations to other classes. [...] After pronouncing the regime to be bourgeois – which no one questions – Hirsch, together with his masters, overlooks a mere trifle: the position of the proletariat in this regime.”⁷⁵ *The defensive struggle consisted in preserving the advantageous positions gained in the theatre of operations in order to prepare for decisive battles in which the proletariat would necessarily have to go on the attack. Tactical strength in times of great struggle depended on the strategic ability to accomplish this aim.*

But the moment of the offensive is where, as we have pointed out, Gramsci is most ambiguous and the Italian revolutionary’s strategic reflections once again differ from Trotsky’s.

Gramsci and Machiavelli

Machiavelli was the main classical author of political philosophy who influenced Gramsci’s theories. Although it cannot be proven conclusively, it can be said that even the distinction between East and West was drawn from his readings of the Florentine writer.⁷⁶ But aside from being a fundamental author of political philosophy, Machiavelli was the military thinker who laid the foundations upon which all strategic theory that came later was based. Even Clausewitz, who was typically contemptuously critical of other military authors, was not only very careful with regards to Machiavelli, but also very enthusiastic when his writings were translated into German by Fichte.⁷⁷

However, Machiavelli’s military theory – a precursor in many ways – had to be surpassed. Later theories, after the Napoleonic Wars, could not stop at formulating the rules of battle, but also had to advance towards examining the events that would unfold within it.

As Felix Gilbert put it: “Although Machiavelli began as a vehement critic of the chess-like wars of the fifteenth century, eighteenth-century generals returned to some extent to wars of manoeuvring [referring to manoeuvring in contrast to battle], and this development is not entirely against the line of thought in military science that Machiavelli had started. When war is seen as determined by rational laws, it is only logical to leave nothing to chance and to expect that the adversary will throw his hand in when he has been brought into a position where the game is rationally lost.”⁷⁸

It is not our intention to affirm that when Gramsci adopted Machiavelli, he also adopted his theoretical limitations, but more modestly, we find it illustrative to make an analogy with a critique which can be similarly applied to Antonio Gramsci’s strategic thought.

If we draw a parallel between Gramsci’s work and the limits in Machiavelli’s strategic thought, we could say that *although Gramsci dedicated a large part of his life and work to*

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp.158-9.

⁷⁶ When explaining why Alexander the Great had been able to stabilise his power within a few years of displacing Darius III Codomannus, Machiavelli compared the difficulty in seizing power in France (the West) and Turkey (the East) depending on whether the king ruled directly over his subjects or with the help of noblemen, the latter serving as ‘trenches’ that could be used by those seeking to seize power, but also against the new ruler himself, making it difficult for him to achieve stability.

⁷⁷ Cf., Paret, Peter, *Clausewitz and the State*, Princeton University Press, 2007.

⁷⁸ Gilbert, F., ‘Machiavelli: The Renaissance of the Art of War’, in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton University Press, 1986, p.30.

the struggle against social democratic tendencies, his emphasis on the preparation of forces prior to battle and scarce analysis of their use in combat allowed future reformist trends to interpret his theory from a social democratic standpoint – starting with Palmiro Togliatti’s PCI itself – which openly contradicted his own political biography as a revolutionary of the Third International.

IV. Conclusions

Trotsky, the most Clausewitzian of Marxists

Throughout this article, we have attempted to establish the similarities and differences between Gramsci’s and Trotsky’s strategic theories. We have explained how the differences were not due to the Red Army founder having been a ‘theorist of the permanent offensive’, but due to the relationship that each revolutionary established between attack and defence, position and manoeuvre.

According to Clausewitz, defence and attack are two ‘ways in which war unfolds’. The superiority of the defensive aspect over the offensive one is determined by the greater deployment of forces required by the latter. This implies that when an army is capable of successfully defending itself, this does not mean it has the forces it needs to attack. In this basic affirmation of Clausewitzian thought, we can find agreement both in Gramsci and Trotsky. It is what we saw in the agreement between both revolutionaries in terms of confronting the ‘class-against-class’ orientation and defending the defensive united front.

The superiority of the defence has yet another consequence in Clausewitz’s theoretical framework, and it is that attack and defence are not in themselves polar opposites.⁷⁹ The fact that preservation is easier than conquest as a general rule means that in many cases, neither of the opponents has enough strength to attack. It is what justifies, among other reasons, ‘the suspension of war’, which makes the clash between opposing forces an inconstant one. Here is where we can find another point of convergence between Trotsky and Gramsci. We have seen that both suggested the existence of a slower rhythm in Europe as from 1924. However, this is also where the differences began. To Trotsky, it was a relative equilibrium that implied the definite possibility of ‘sudden shifts’ in the situation, including the case of the ‘West’, and not ‘slower’ rhythms in general.

In Gramsci, the transition to the attack is one of the most ambiguous points of his strategic thought. As we said when comparing his thought to Machiavelli’s, this is what all types of reformist trends have based their policies on in order to adopt the concept of the ‘war of position’ as a basis for a strategy devoted to the search for spaces within the bourgeois regime, taking the concept of ‘defence’ to absurd levels.

As Clausewitz said, “defence in general (including of course strategic defence) is not an absolute state of waiting and repulse; it is not total, but only relative passive endurance. Consequently, it is permeated with more or less pronounced elements of the offensive”.⁸⁰

In his writings on late-20s and early-30s Germany, Trotsky constantly proposed the connection between defensive battles and the development of the means necessary for the

⁷⁹ That is to say, he who is interested in being attacked due to his ability to wage a successful defensive war is not necessarily interested – in the same circumstances – in waging an offensive war if an attack is not launched.

⁸⁰ Clausewitz, op. cit., p.524.

offensive, placing the ‘fortresses’ at the service of advancing the masses’ united front organisations – be they soviets, factory committees or otherwise – as well as the self-defence and arming of the proletariat.

This logic, of course, was not limited to the German situation. We have seen it applied in the comparison with Russia. We can also see it throughout the Spanish Revolution, when Trotsky maintained: “We can and must defend bourgeois democracy not by bourgeois democratic means but by the methods of the class struggle, which in turn pave the way for the replacement of bourgeois democracy by the dictatorship of the proletariat.”⁸¹

Just as with Germany in 1923, his most elevated strategic thought would once again express itself in another one of the historical process’s ‘breaking points’, the May Days of 1937 in Barcelona. Just as with Germany a decade before, Trotsky would have to respond to the same arguments upheld by Brandler on the insufficiency of arming the masses. The same would occur with regard to the masses’ united front organisations, except that in regard to Spain, he would not have to debate against those exclaiming on the insufficiency of their development, but with those who, like Andreu Nin, believed that their impulse was unnecessary. After the defeat, he would once again debate against the leaders who wished to elude accountability by arguing that the masses had not deployed enough initiative.

As late as May 1937, in the face of the armed uprising of the Catalan workers in defence of their positions against the attacks of the Stalinist Assault Guards, Trotsky believed that it was still possible to avoid defeat:

“If the Catalan proletariat had seized power in May 1937 [...] they would have found support throughout all of Spain. The bourgeois-Stalinist reaction would not even have found two regiments with which to crush the Catalan workers. In the territory occupied by Franco not only the workers but also the peasants would have turned toward the Catalan proletariat, would have isolated the fascist army and brought about its irresistible disintegration. It is doubtful whether under these conditions any foreign government would have risked throwing its regiments onto the burning soil of Spain. Intervention would have become materially impossible, or at least extremely dangerous.

“Naturally, in every insurrection, there is an element of uncertainty and risk. But the subsequent course of events has proven that even in the case of defeat the situation of the Spanish proletariat would have been incomparably more favourable than now, to say nothing of the fact that the revolutionary party would have assured its future.”⁸²

The points of contact between this policy and that which is upheld by Trotsky in 1923 are clear. Once again, the aim is to establish a ‘workers’ government’ within a region, which Trotsky calls upon the POUM⁸³ and the CNT left⁸⁴ to fight for, as a ‘revolutionary bastion’ whose defence would entail the development of the revolution on a national scale, using it as a launching pad for the programme defending the nationalisation of the land by the peasants throughout all of Spain, the liberation of Morocco, whose oppression allowed Franco to use it as an operations base, etc. In short, to uphold the demands that the Popular

⁸¹ Trotsky, L., ‘Is Victory Possible in Spain?’, in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, Pathfinder Press, 1973, p.257.

⁸² Trotsky, L., ‘A Test of Ideas and Individuals through the Spanish Experience’, in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, op. cit., p.279.

⁸³ Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification. Created by the merging of Andreu Nin’s group with Joaquín Maurín’s Workers and Peasants’ Bloc.

⁸⁴ National Confederation of Labour, led by the anarchists of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) from the early 1930s.

Front had explicitly rejected in order to unleash the revolutionary forces that it hoped to contain. However, the POUM reaffirmed its policy of the “betrayal of the proletariat for the sake of an alliance with the bourgeoisie”⁸⁵ which Trotsky had been criticising since the previous year.⁸⁶

In Saxony, the social democratic left refused to support an insurrection and a general strike, so the KPD called upon the working class to abort its plans and not break away from the framework of bourgeois legality. In the case of Barcelona, the POUM leadership evidently didn't even get this far, but the similarities are still apparent. The anarchist leaders of the CNT and FAI, in accordance with the Popular Front's programme of maintaining “the principle of authority in all its vigour”⁸⁷, asked the workers to cease fighting; the POUM's leadership actively participated in the demobilisation using the same arguments as Brandler. The POUM leaders that had already been expelled in December 1936 from the Generalitat of Catalonia were an example of how to also defend bourgeois legality ‘from the outside’.

What we can see from both the German revolution of 1923 and the Spanish Revolution, as well as from the different processes that we have been analysing throughout this article, is that Trotsky developed the relationship between defence and attack on a new level, thereby becoming the most Clausewitzian of Marxists.⁸⁸ The point in which Gramsci's strategic

⁸⁵ Trotsky, L., ‘The Treachery of the POUM’, in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, op. cit., p.209.

⁸⁶ Article for *Estrategia Internacional*: As we will elaborate on in the next issue, in order to justify their entry in the Consell de la Generalitat, the POUM would embellish the Republican Left by emphasising their ‘profoundly popular character’ and the more leftist character of the republican programme. Despite the fact that the new government would be led by the Republican Left, the POUM considered that, “As for proletarian hegemony, the absolute majority of workers’ representatives will fully guarantee it”, that is to say, the Stalinists, Social Democrats and Anarchists (Cf., Broué, P., *La Revolución Española 1931-1939*, Barcelona, Ediciones Península, 1977, p.202.) (Own translation.) However, as Trotsky would point out: “Politically most striking is the fact that the Spanish Popular Front lacked in reality even a parallelogram of forces. The bourgeoisie’s place was occupied by its shadow. Through the medium of the Stalinists, Socialists, and Anarchists, the Spanish bourgeoisie subordinated the proletariat to itself without even bothering to participate in the Popular Front.” (Trotsky, L., ‘The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning’, in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, Pathfinder Press, 1973, p.309. Also at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/xx/spain01.htm>

⁸⁷ ‘Programa electoral del Frente Popular’, in Broué, P., *La Revolución Española 1931-1939*, Barcelona, Península, 1977, p.186. (Own translation)

⁸⁸ Clausewitz held the view that “The destruction of enemy forces always appears as the most elevated and effective means to which all of the rest must yield.” On the basis of a unilateral interpretation of this affirmation, many have labelled him the theorist of the permanent offensive. From Count Schlieffen – author of the plan applied by Germany in the First World War – who used it to justify his positions, to the anti-Clausewitzian military theorist Liddell Hart, who used this label to discredit him. However, this definition was not used by Clausewitz to say that in every war and every moment, the immediate aim was to destroy the enemy’s army, but instead tried to explain the change of era posed by the French Revolution, and how it has created deep changes in the field of tactics and strategy in contrast with the ‘cabinet wars’ of the 18th Century.

Something similar happened within revolutionary Marxism during the imperialist period. Within the Third International, some sectors interpreted the ‘relevance’ of the proletarian revolution in the new period as synonymous with ‘imminence’. Thalheimer, Fröhlich, Lukács, who organised the periodical *Kommunismus*, were Lenin’s Schlieffen. They interpreted the era’s revolutionary perspective as a basis for the permanent ‘revolutionary offensive’. Lenin and Trotsky would confront them in the Communist International’s debates.

The fact is that neither Clausewitz nor Trotsky considered that ‘the destruction of enemy forces’ was the only purpose of every war, but that this was determined by the effective existence of the conditions necessary to reach the aim. Hans Delbrück, on the basis of an interpretation of Clausewitz’s notes, pointed out how this determined two poles of the art of war: the ‘strategy of annihilation’ (Niederwerfungsstrategie) when fighting for the war’s ‘decision’, and the ‘strategy of attrition’ (Ermattungsstrategie) when ‘limited objectives’ are sought. Every strategy exists between these two poles under certain circumstances, generating a varied multiplicity of wars that ranges from quasi armed observation to ‘absolute war’.

thought is weakest is where Trotsky stands out among the great strategists of revolutionary Marxism.

On the combination of 'position' and 'manoeuvre'

As we have stated, Trotsky, just as Gramsci, firmly confronted the ultra-leftist orientation adopted by Stalinism as from 1928, in the same way that he had previously challenged the theorists of the 'revolutionary offensive' and Bordigism itself during the first years of the Third International. Nevertheless, the founder of the Red Army also firmly confronted the opportunistic interpretations that aimed to assimilate the formulations set forth in the Fourth Congress of the Communist International with a policy of peacefully conquering 'positions' within the framework of the bourgeois regime. Likewise, he debated against those who argued in favour of great 'manoeuvring' by using the example of the Russian Revolution to sink into passivity and fatalism while waiting for the conditions of the October 1917 insurrection to reproduce themselves by the sheer force of events.

In spite of this, it was common for many 'centrist' trends within Trotskyism to use the fact that Trotsky had defended the tactic of a 'workers' government' in 1923 as a supposed justification for capitulating before different bourgeois governments. One of the recent justifications of this kind has been developed by Daniel Bensaïd in 'On the return of the politico-strategic question', as well as by other leaders of the ex-Revolutionary Communist

From the point of view of proletarian revolution, Trotsky would develop this difference on the basis of the following contrast: on the one hand, there was the stage of capitalist growth during the decades prior to the First World War, in which 'limited objectives' were sought; "Before a growing capitalism," said Trotsky, "the best party leadership could do nothing but precipitate the creation of a workers' party." On the other hand, there was the stage which opened up after the war, where the leadership's key role was to be prepared for sudden turns in the situation, both to the left (with the possibility of revolution and the seizure of power) and to the right (with the need to go on the defensive) which would pose decisive clashes. At the same time, in the 1920s, for example, Trotsky pointed out a combination of both. While maintaining that the Communist International's key role was to be prepared for sudden turns in the situation – and he later debated this with regards to both Germany and China – in the case of the USSR, the Red Army founder posed the need for an active economic policy from the workers' state in order to develop the productive forces as a basis on which to maintain the alliance with the peasantry. To Trotsky, both orientations conformed to a strategy for the development of international revolution.

The absence of this type of strategic reflection was negatively expressed within the discussions held by Trotskyist groups after the Second World War and the Yalta agreement, when it became necessary to re-establish a new strategic framework and programmatic adjustments. As we pointed out in the article 'Trotsky and Gramsci: A Posthumous Dialogue' (*Estrategia Internacional* No. 19; <http://www.ft.org.ar/estrategia/ei19/ei19inglestrotskygramsci.htm>), Trotskyism split into two main trends on this issue, both of them wrong. Those who upheld the 'stagnationist' thesis – "the productive forces of humanity have stagnated", they repeated, in tune with the text of the *Transitional Programme* – without seeing that the enormous destruction of productive forces provoked by the war and the subsequent capitalist reconstruction in Europe allowed, in the period ranging from 1948 to 1968, a partial development of productive forces as a continuation of the imperialist stage as a phase in capitalism's decline. On the other extreme were those who saw the post-war 'boom' as a neo-capitalism or 'late capitalism', adopting a corrected view of the bourgeois theory of capitalist crises, of automatic 'waves' or cycles of growth where the class struggle had a completely subordinate role.

In both cases, the consequences were the following: on the one hand, the refusal to advance in creating strong revolutionary parties in situations in which one could only seek 'limited aims', and on the other hand, when the seizure of power was a possibility, identifying the emergence of new bureaucratic workers' states with the inevitable advance of socialism, while losing sight of the strategy on the whole as elaborated by Trotsky, which showed the impossibility of advancing in this way towards the internationalist development of the revolution.

League of France after abandoning the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and before its dissolution into the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).⁸⁹

According to Bensaïd, "The debates at the time of the fifth congress of the Communist International (1924) on the record of the German revolution and the Social Democrat-Communist governments of Saxony and Thuringia in the late summer of 1923 [...] reveal the unresolved ambiguity of the formulae that came out of the early congresses of the Communist International and the range of interpretations which they could give rise to in practice."⁹⁰ With this in mind, he elaborates his own interpretation of the requirements for participating in a 'workers' government', in which the existence of the subjective conditions necessary to begin the preparation of an insurrection is replaced by a "significant upsurge in social mobilisation", where "more modestly than the arming of the workers demanded by Zinoviev [sic]", he suggests minimal demands in the form of a series of leftist measures to be adopted by the government in question, and lastly, that the "revolutionaries" have the necessary strength "even if they cannot guarantee that the non-revolutionaries in the government keep to their commitments, they have to pay a high price for failure to do so". This entire reflection is aimed at justifying the participation of a leader from the United Secretariat⁹¹ as a minister in Lula's government: "...we chose not to make this a matter of principle (though we expressed our reservations orally to the comrades about participation and alerted them to the dangers). We preferred to go along with the experiment so as to draw up the balance sheet alongside the comrades, rather than give lessons 'from a distance'."⁹²

More recently, and without hoping to attempt a justification based on the "unresolved ambiguity" (Bensaïd *dixit*) of the debates within the Communist International, the Partido Obrero of Argentina has defended voting for the Syriza coalition – an electoral organisation with no structural influence among the working class or the poor, a combination of a high-profile candidate in the media and splinters of the old Greek Communist Party – while calling to build a 'government of all the left' from which one would demand that it break ties with imperialism and the European Union, the adoption of anti-capitalist measures and the 'promotion' of none other than the creation of a 'workers' government'.⁹³

A minimally serious analysis of the controversy surrounding the German revolution of 1923 shows that one can find arguments to support or participate in governments of class collaboration in the theses on the Popular Front set forth in the Communist International's Seventh Congress, but they could certainly not be found, to say the least, in the policy defended by Trotsky. As we pointed out before, in the face of Stalinism and trends in favour of the Popular Front, Trotsky clearly explained in the *Transitional Programme* the anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist meaning, contrary to the "purely 'democratic' meaning later assigned to it by the epigones", of the 'workers' government' slogan.

From the other extreme of those who see 'workers' governments' in any circumstance, the Spartacists of the International Communist League (ICL) use the statement by Trotsky cited from the *Transitional Programme* to maintain that the founder of the Red Army implicitly

⁸⁹ For a debate with Bensaïd on this point, see: Cinatti, C., '¿Qué partido para qué estrategia?', in *Estrategia Internacional* No. 24 in <http://www.ft-ci.org/Que-partido-para-que-estrategia?lang=es>

⁹⁰ Bensaïd, D., 'On the return of the politico-strategic question', in <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bensaïd/2006/08/polstrat.htm>

⁹¹ We are referring to Miguel Rossetto, the Minister of Agrarian Development for the PT in Brazil.

⁹² Bensaïd, Daniel, op. cit.

⁹³ See Cinatti, C., 'Lucha de clases y nuevos fenómenos políticos en el quinto año de la crisis capitalista', *Estrategia Internacional* No.28, in http://www.ft-ci.org/IMG/pdf/EI28_Lucha_de_clases.pdf

rejected his own policy for Germany in 1923. However, in Trotsky's view, both in 1923 and in 1938, the slogan of the workers' government was always conceived as 'anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist', and opposed to the "'democratic' meaning" later assigned to it by all kinds of trends favouring the Popular Front.

In fact, Trotsky has no qualms in comparing the creation of the 'workers' government' in Saxony to the Bolshevik tactic in October 1917. "Under certain conditions," he stated, "the slogan of a workers' government can become a reality in Europe. That is to say, a moment may arrive when the Communists together with the left elements of the Social Democracy will set up a workers' government in a way similar to ours in Russia when we created a workers' and peasants' government together with the Left Social-Revolutionaries. Such a phase would constitute a transition to the proletarian dictatorship, the full and completed one."⁹⁴

The ICL respond to what they see as Trotsky's 'heresy' as follows: "This analogy is totally inappropriate. The Left Social Revolutionaries entered the government after the proletarian seizure of power and on the basis of soviet power, whereas in Germany the question concerned a regional bourgeois parliament in a capitalist state!"⁹⁵

However, Trotsky emphatically opposed these types of idealisations of the October Revolution with the aim of justifying sectarian passivity and fatalism by defending a supposed 'Russian model'. According to the founder of the Fourth International, "Not only up to the Brest-Litovsk peace but even up to autumn of 1918, the social content of the revolution was restricted to a petty-bourgeois agrarian overturn and workers' control over production. This means that the revolution in its actions had not yet passed the boundaries of bourgeois society. During this first period, soldiers' soviets ruled side by side with workers' soviets, and often elbowed them aside. Only toward the autumn of 1918 did the petty-bourgeois soldier-agrarian elemental wave recede a little to its shores, and the workers went forward with the nationalisation of the means of production. Only from this time can one speak of the inception of a real dictatorship of the proletariat. But even here it is necessary to make certain large reservations. During those initial years, the dictatorship was geographically confined to the old Moscow principality and was compelled to wage a three-year war along all the radii from Moscow to the periphery. This means that up to 1921, precisely up to the NEP, that is, what went on was still the struggle to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat upon the national scale."⁹⁶

In this scenario, which is the only one that corresponds with the historical development of the Russian Revolution, it is a travesty to limit the problem of the seizure of power in Russia to the occupation of the Winter Palace while rejecting the comparison with Germany in 1923.

Paraphrasing Clausewitz, Trotsky considered that "civil war is nothing but the violent continuation of the class struggle by other means". "Civil war," he said, "is a definite stage of the class struggle when, breaking through the framework of legality, it brings the

⁹⁴ Trotsky, L., 'Report on the Fourth World Congress', *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol.2, op. cit., p.324 ; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-2/24b.htm>

⁹⁵ 'A Trotskyist Critique of Germany 1923 and the Comintern', in <http://www.icl-fi.org/english/esp/56/germany1923.html>

⁹⁶ Trotsky, L., 'The Class Nature of the Soviet State', *Writings (1933-34)*, Pathfinder Press, 1975, p.106; in <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1933/10/sovstate.htm>

opposing forces onto the plane of confrontation, publicly and, to some extent, physically.”⁹⁷ It comprises at least three stages: the preparation of the insurrection, the insurrection itself, and the consolidation of victory.

From this point of view, *how does the Fourth Congress of the Communist International elaborate on the Bolshevik tactic in October 1917? In the stipulation that the ‘workers’ government’ extends to the first stage of the civil war, as a way of building ‘revolutionary bastions’ to advance the preparation of the seizure of power in a country.*

The ICL cites historian Evelyn Anderson, who, in their view, “noted astutely [sic]” that “The Communist position was manifestly absurd. The two policies of accepting responsibility of government, on the one hand, and of preparing for a revolution, on the other, obviously excluded each other. Yet the Communists pursued both at the same time, with the inevitable result of complete failure.”⁹⁸

What it doesn’t take much astuteness to see is that the Spartacists do not understand Trotsky. While shielding itself with a simplistic scheme, passive sectarianism ends up reproducing the same operation that characterises opportunistic interpretations such as that which we quoted from Bensaïd. Namely: the separation of the ‘workers’ government’ formula from the strategy as a whole. According to Trotsky, the two are inseparable.

Tactical victory and strategic success

As we have seen, the slogan of the ‘workers’ government’ was conceived by the Fourth Congress of the Communist International as a consequence of the development of the united front tactic. In Gramsci’s view, the united front formula was related in turn to the ‘war of position’ that he would elaborate on in his *Prison Notebooks*. However, it would be Trotsky, in his *Transitional Programme*, who would summarise the essential traits of the workers’ government formula as an anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist slogan contrary to the ‘popular front’. The workers’ government slogan had an episodic role in agitation depending on the concrete situation, and had the fundamental aim of amplifying the influence of revolutionaries. This could be due to its educational value in accelerating the masses’ understanding of their traditional leaderships, or because it became a reality, in which case it would facilitate the advance towards the dictatorship of the proletariat.

It is within this same framework that Trotsky proposed to implement the ‘workers’ government’ tactic in Germany in 1923 despite the fact that this particular case is not explicitly mentioned in the *Transitional Programme*. Throughout his life, Trotsky assigned a variety of practical uses to the workers’ government formula, some of which we have mentioned in these pages: as an educational slogan aiming to amplify the influence of revolutionaries, for example, between April and September 1917 in Russia; as a coalition government with the Left Social Revolutionaries after October in order to consolidate power; in the case of Germany in 1923 as a regional parliamentary government with the left SPD in order to prepare the insurrection and create ‘revolutionary bastions’ that would serve as a launching pad for the seizure of power; with the same objective as a demand that the POUM and the anarchists seize power in Barcelona during the May Days of 1937.

That said, Trotsky also dealt in the *Transitional Programme* with the improbable hypothesis of workers’ and peasants’ governments being created by traditional workers’ leaderships.

⁹⁷ Trotsky, L., ‘Problems of Civil War’, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-25)*, op. cit., p.180.

⁹⁸ ‘A Trotskyist Critique of Germany 1923 and the Comintern, op. cit.

On this point, he said: “Past experience shows, as has already been stated, that this is, to say the least, highly improbable. However, one cannot categorically deny in advance the theoretical possibility that, under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances (war, defeat, financial crash, mass revolutionary pressure, etc.), the petty-bourgeois parties, including the Stalinists, may go further than they themselves wish along the road to a break with the bourgeoisie. In any case, one thing is not to be doubted: even if this highly improbable variant somewhere, at some time, becomes a reality and the workers’ and farmers’ government in the above-mentioned sense is established in fact, it would represent merely a short episode on the road to the actual dictatorship of the proletariat.”⁹⁹

The importance of this formulation resides in the fact that the ‘exceptional circumstances’ mentioned by Trotsky were generalised in the period following the Second World War, and the hypothesis posed in the *Transitional Programme* materialised in China, Yugoslavia and North Vietnam, and after the immediate post-war period in Cuba.¹⁰⁰ These were peasant-based leaderships which elaborated other strategies and advanced towards processes in which the bourgeoisie was expropriated, mostly as self-defence mechanisms, creating what the Fourth International called ‘deformed workers’ states’.

In this scenario, the distinctive feature of most of the organisations into which the Fourth International split during the post-war period was to see these triumphant revolutions which created bureaucratically deformed workers’ states as the unstoppable expansion of socialism on a global scale.

When evaluating the development of this ‘improbable hypothesis’ set forth in the *Transitional Programme* beyond the strategic framework laid out by Trotsky himself – regarding the relationship between manoeuvre and position, defence and attack, as we have expanded on here – the conclusion could be none other than to devalue the importance of strong revolutionary organisations rooted in the working class for the triumph of socialist revolution.¹⁰¹ From this point of view, the tactic of a ‘workers’ and peasants’ government’ itself became a dead end leading to the capitulation before petty-bourgeois leaderships at the head of revolutions emerging after the immediate post-war period.

The Cuban Revolution put these ideas to the test. Without its strategic framework, the formula of a ‘workers’ and peasants’ government’ became a type of label, assigned to or denied to Castro’s government, which led to various dead ends, be they opportunistic or sectarian. On the one hand, Pierre Lambert stated in 1961 that Cuba had a ‘workers’ and peasants’ government’ within the framework of the capitalist system which either the bourgeoisie would bring back to ‘bourgeois normality’, or the masses would overturn by advancing towards socialist revolution.¹⁰² Once this ‘label’ was assigned, curiously, neither Lambert nor his movement considered it necessary to resume this discussion until many years later. Meanwhile, the American SWP adopted openly pro-Castro positions, stating that this was a ‘revolutionary workers’ and peasants’ government’, and that the lack of organisations of proletarian democracy was a secondary issue that would be resolved over time.¹⁰³ In the case of Palabra Obrera, they went from a sectarian position that defined the Cuban Revolution as a ‘liberating revolution’ – in reference to the 1955 coup in Argentina –

⁹⁹ Trotsky, L., *The Transitional Programme for Socialist Revolution*, op. cit., p.135.

¹⁰⁰ Cf., Maiello, Matías and Albamonte, Emilio, ‘En los límites de la “restauración burguesa”’, in *Estrategia Internacional* No. 27, 2011; <http://www.ft-ci.org/En-los-limites-de-la-restauracion-burguesa?lang=es>

¹⁰¹ Cf., Maiello, Matías and Albamonte, Emilio, op. cit.

¹⁰² Cited in González, Ernesto, *El trotskismo obrero internacionalista en la Argentina*, Vol.3, Antídoto, 1999, p.54.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.53

to an opportunistic position similar to that of the SWP. Of course, the International Secretariat had pioneered the tradition of maintaining this type of opportunistic orientation.

As Ernesto González acknowledges, “The positions held at the time by the SWP and Palabra Obrera led them to avoid proposing the creation of a Trotskyist party in Cuba,”¹⁰⁴ to which we would add that neither did they collaborate towards building revolutionary parties in any other part of the world. In this result, they converged with Lambert’s abstentionism. However, the ‘improbable hypothesis’ included by Trotsky in the *Transitional Programme* was not a shortcut to avoid working towards the strategic outcome, but on the contrary it was an attempt to defend the strategy in the face of different scenarios.

This type of strategic thought had already been set forth by Trotsky in previous scenarios. In the early 1930s, he wrote the following about Germany:

“In a previous letter the thought was expressed that under *certain* historical circumstances the proletariat can conquer even under a left-centrist leadership. Many comrades were inclined, I have been informed, to interpret this thought in the sense of minimising the role of the Left Opposition and of mitigating the mistakes and sins of bureaucratic centrism. Needless to say how far I am from such an interpretation.

“The strategy of the party is an exceedingly important element of the proletarian revolution. But it is by no means the only factor. With an exceptionally favourable relation of forces the proletariat can come to power even under a non-Marxist leadership. This was the case for example in the Paris Commune and, in a period which lies closer to us, in Hungary. The depth of the disintegration of the enemy camp, its political demoralisation, the worthlessness of its leaders, can assure decisive superiority to the proletariat for a certain time even if its own leadership is weak.

“But in the first place, there is nothing to guarantee such a ‘fortunate’ coincidence of circumstances; it represents the exception rather than the rule. Second, the victory obtained under such conditions remains, as the same two examples – Paris and Hungary – prove, exceedingly unstable. To weaken the struggle against Stalinism on the ground that under *certain* conditions even the Stalinist leadership would prove unable to prevent the victory of the proletariat [...] would be to stand all of Marxist politics on its head.”¹⁰⁵

This is so because in Trotsky’s view, just as in that of Clausewitz, nothing can replace work on strategy. In the words of the latter, “in strategy there is no such thing as victory. Part of strategic success lies in timely preparation for a tactical victory; the greater the strategic success, the greater the likelihood of a victorious engagement. The rest of strategic success lies in the exploitation of a victory won. The more strategy has been able, through its ingenuity, to exploit a victorious battle; the more that it can wrest out of the collapsing edifice whose foundations have been shattered by the action; the more completely the fruits of the hard-won victory can be harvested; then the greater the success”.¹⁰⁶

Trotsky employs this same strategic meaning to define none other than what he considers to be the ‘historic role of the Left Opposition’, and under this title, he points out that “to blur our difference with centrism in the name of facilitating ‘unity’ would mean not only to commit political suicide, but also to cover up, strengthen, and nourish all the negative

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.58. (Own translation)

¹⁰⁵ Trotsky, L., ‘On the state of the Left Opposition’, *Writings 1932-33*, Pathfinder Press, 1972, p.35.

¹⁰⁶ Clausewitz, op. cit., p.363.

features of bureaucratic centrism, and by that fact alone help the reactionary currents within it against the revolutionary tendencies".¹⁰⁷ He would consider this issue even more essential from 1933, after Stalinism allowed the ascent of Hitler without a fight, proposing the need to build a new revolutionary party of the proletariat on a global scale, the Fourth International.

The abandonment of Trotsky's strategic view led Trotskyists in the post-war period down the path that the Red Army founder had already warned them against. In the case of Cuba in 1961, as we mentioned above, at the same time as the vast majority of Trotskyist tendencies identified the triumph of the revolution with the supposedly revolutionary character of Castro's leadership and its capacity to strategically capitalise on the victory in favour of advancing socialism, Fidel Castro was, among other things, intervening to take control of the trade unions.

Under the impulse of the revolution, the Cuban working class reclaimed its organisations from Eusebio Mujal's bureaucracy, but Castro resorted to the argument of the dangers that threatened the revolution to place the Cuban Stalinists at the helm of the workers' federation, who thereby became allies of the regime without having played any role in the revolution. At the same time, the persecution and outlawing of the small Cuban Trotskyist organisation, the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR), was set in motion. Although the POR had an important tradition within the Cuban revolutionary movement, it would be accused of being an 'undercover agent of imperialism'.¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, these events were not enough for the Trotskyist organisations that existed at the time to question their view of Castro's leadership; on the contrary, they soon abandoned the defence of the Trotskyists of the POR¹⁰⁹ and progressively adapted to Castro's regime, while the SWP led by Barnes went so far as to abandon Trotskyism altogether.

This was the necessary consequence of setting aside strategic thinking, adopting an orientation that ignored how to capitalise strategically on the revolutionary victory and the analysis of its different defensive and offensive moments, the role of the positions conquered in each of these shifts, etc. In other words, it was the consequence of ignoring the legacy of Trotsky's living thought.

Lenin stated in his *Philosophical Notebooks* that "It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the *whole* of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!"¹¹⁰

Likewise, we could say that it is impossible to understand the breadth of Trotsky as a revolutionary without understanding how he conceived of 'workers' governments' or

¹⁰⁷ Trotsky, L., 'On the state of the Left Opposition', op. cit., p.36.

¹⁰⁸ Trotsky himself had analysed the hypothesis of this type of relationship between the peasant-based army leading a triumphant revolution and the workers' vanguard of the cities in his exchanges with the Chinese oppositionists. Cf., Trotsky, L., 'Peasant War in China and the Proletariat', *Writings 1932*, Pathfinder, 1973; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/09/china.htm>

¹⁰⁹ This was the weak basis on which Trotskyist groupings reunited in 1963. The inevitable consequence was a new event of this type years later, when in Nicaragua, the adaptation of the majority of the United Secretariat to the FSLN leadership led them to support the expulsion of the 'Simón Bolívar Brigade' organised by the Morenoites.

¹¹⁰ Lenin, V. I., *Collected Works*, Vol.38, Progress, 1972, p.180.

‘workers’ and peasants’ governments’ as springboards for advancing the preparation or triumphant development of the civil war, the seizure of power on a national scale and the conquest of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is particularly important to understand this in relation to the three moments during Trotsky’s lifetime when revolution could actually have changed the course of history: Petrograd in 1917, which marked the establishment of the first workers’ state; Saxony in 1923, which offered the possibility of setting in motion the seizure of power within one of the main imperialist superpowers, the failure of which was a key factor in isolating and bureaucratising the USSR and the Communist International; and Barcelona in 1937, where there was a chance of stopping the march of humanity towards the Second World War.

This gives us the authority to say, paraphrasing Lenin, that none of the Trotskyists from the post-war period onwards understood Trotsky, because without fully understanding his strategy at these moments of historic rupture, it is impossible to grasp the broader revolutionary implications of his legacy.

The debate surrounding the tactic of a ‘workers’ government’ beyond the framework of Trotsky’s strategy is therefore, as Marx would say, a purely scholastic question. Without starting from his living thought, one cannot understand the significance of Trotsky’s conception of the ‘workers’ government’, which used in an anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist sense could be an excellent path to the dictatorship of the proletariat and not merely a populist slogan.

Trotsky had already fought Stalinism when it revived the formula of the ‘democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants’ – a slogan of ‘old Bolshevism’ that had been surpassed by Lenin himself in his ‘April Theses’ – to justify the subordination to the Kuomintang, a policy which led to the defeat of the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27. From 1935 onwards, Trotsky opposed the orientation towards ‘popular fronts’ that Stalinism upheld as its strategy in the Seventh Congress of the Communist International. This called for the creation of ‘united front governments’ composed of anti-fascist organisations as a formula for masking agreements with sectors of the imperialist bourgeoisie, turning Communist parties into mere instruments of USSR diplomacy as was clearly expressed in the Spanish Revolution and the French general strike and factory occupations in 1936. To quote Trotsky: “‘The People’s Front’ represents the coalition of the proletariat with the imperialist bourgeoisie, in the shape of the Radical Party¹¹¹ and smaller tripe of the same sort.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ In reference to the French Radical Party, a party historically tied to French colonial oppression with a traditional base in the petty bourgeoisie of the cities and countryside.

¹¹² Trotsky, L., *Whither France?*, New Park, 1974, p.99;

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/whitherfrance/ch03.htm>