

In Havana?

Conference on Trotsky?

Peter Werbe

2020

It seems improbable that a conference was held in Havana last May to examine the life and ideas of the Russian Bolshevik, Leon Trotsky. One would think the Cuban Stalinist bureaucracy would be averse to allowing a gathering sympathetic to the Soviet dictator's arch rival within the Russian ruling clique power struggle that occurred almost 100 years ago.

Perhaps the Cuban government considers Trotsky and his remaining followers almost 80 years after his assassination to be as irrelevant as does most of the world. Those people who even recognize the name, associate it with small, authoritarian Trotskyist cult-like political sects that flit around resistance movements trying to sell their newspapers and recruit members.

The two day conference in the Cuban capital was organized by Frank Garcia Fernandez, a graduate student in sociology, who is writing his PhD on Trotskyism in Cuba.

Garcia said he attributes much of the interest in Trotsky to the popularity of his depiction in Leonardo Padura's 2009 novel about Trotsky and his assassin, *Ramon Mercader, The Man Who Loved Dogs*.

The Spanish author's generous portrayal of the revolutionary hounded by Stalin's secret police who marked him for death as an "enemy of the people," easily gains the reader's sympathy. Only in one sentence does Trotsky veer from his beautiful loser characterization when he says he realizes that he is being hunted by the apparatus he established to destroy political rivals of the Bolsheviks. Now, it has turned on him, and is finally successful in Mexico as Mercader sinks an axe into Trotsky's skull in 1940.

What was billed as the first International Academic Conference met at the Juan Marineto Cultural Center in conjunction with the Cuban Institute of Philosophy, and was hosted by the Casa Benito Juarez in Old Havana. The gathering was limited to 80 participants, half Cuban; half foreign. As the conference title suggests, it was attended mainly by academics and representatives from several small Trotskyist sects including ones from the U.S.

Although participants were reportedly ecstatic about the subject matter and presentations, it appears they have learned nothing from their history. For those who adhere to a political philosophy that advocates revolution as requiring the entire working class in revolt against capitalism, but reduce their admiration to One Great Man seems a contradiction they cannot grasp.

The 1917 Russian Revolution was made by a population in revolt against the Czar, class society, and war, not by a cadre of middle-class, Marxist politicians. The Bolsheviks' role was the seizure of the Russian state apparatus, the suppression of all radical opposition movements, and launching of a state capitalist economy. Among the Bolshevik counter-revolutionaries, Trotsky in particular played a murderous role of betrayal in the suppression of a sailor's revolt at the Kronstadt naval base and the destruction of an anarchist peasant movement in Ukraine. The major work of Voline, *The Unknown Revolution: 1917-1921*, available again from PM Press, and *The Bolsheviks & Workers' Control* by Maurice Brinton, from Black Rose Books, both document how Lenin and his cohorts, Stalin and Trotsky, destroyed the revolution and set up a totalitarian police state.

Most Marxists and all Leninists deny this account, but none of them can explain how a mass movement of millions disappears from history after overthrowing the existing order only to be replaced by a power struggle of Great Men, about whom libraries of biographies are published. Had the workers, peasants, and soldiers who made an authentic revolution against capital and the state in Russia not been forced off the field of struggle by leftist politicians, it could have been the point at which the revolutionary project triumphed worldwide.

As it was, the Bolshevik seizure of power and the subsequent victory of Stalin over his rivals, including Trotsky, may have very well ended the possibility of a traditional revolution.

So, we say to the Cubans: Forget Trotsky. Remember the mass movement that was extinguished by your own Stalinists, one that is worthy of emulation—the Cuban anarcho-syndicalists who fought Spanish colonists and the Cuban dictators only to finally fall to the repressive hand of the Castro regime.

Time to resume the movement that demands the impossible and make it happen.

Peter Werbe is a member of the *Fifth Estate* editorial collective. He has despised Trotskyism for a long time.

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