

WEEKLY POLITICAL LETTER

January 29, 1962

IN MEMORIAM: NATALIA SEDOVA TROTSKY

Dear Friends:

On January 23rd the air waves from France carried the news of the death of Natalia Sedova Trotsky. We were going to press with the last letter from her pen, written to the French press in opposition to their misrepresentation of her offer to go to Moscow if her demand for a serious and full review of the greatest (1936-38) Frame-Up Trials in history was undertaken. The bourgeois write-up gave the impression that Natalia had mistaken either Khrushchev's de-Stalinization or Mao Tse-tung's opposition to Khrushchev, for genuine Marxism. In the true tradition of the Old Bolshevism, these two totalitarian bureaucrats had destroyed, this frail 82 year old Bolshevik had written with the fervor and revolutionary vigor, of a new youthful adherent to Marxism, who is shocked at the lack of integrity of the bourgeois press in presenting Leon Trotsky as "The spiritual father of Mao Tse-tung."

She fired back: "These words don't belong to me at all; they were introduced by the writer of the interview...A great revolutionary like Leon Trotsky could not in any way be the father of Mao Tse-tung who won his position in direct struggle with the Left Opposition (Trotskyist) and consolidated it by the murder and persecution of revolutionaries just as Chiang Kai-shek did...I don't expect anything from the Russian party nor from its fundamentally anti-communist imitators. All de-Stalinization will prove to be a trap if it doesn't lead to the seizure of power by the proletariat and the dissolution of the police institutions, political, military and economic, based on the counter-revolution which established Stalinist state-capitalism."*

This was the first time that Natalia Trotsky had used the expression, state-capitalism, in speaking of established Communism, in China or Russia "or all others based on the latter model."

Over and above the sadness of her death there came over me a warmth and good feeling as I pondered over her intellectual daring and never-ending optimism. For it is the latter which permeated her as it characterized the small Marxist movement who had fought on until the mighty Tsarist empire had been overthrown; had fused with the greatest spontaneous outburst in history, the Russian Revolution of 1917; had not become "pessimistic" when, soon after the death of Lenin, that first workers' state had become bureaucratized and began devouring

* see the full letter in the January, 1962 issue (Vol. 7, No.1) of News & Letters.

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the children of the revolution, while killing off the General Staff that had led the November Revolution. Instead they searched for new beginnings on an international scale.

Natalia Sedova Trotsky had first come in contact with the revolutionary movement in Tsarist Russia when she was only 15, had emigrated to Europe to study in its schools only to join the small Russian emigre group there. The modest self-effacing young woman who was a member of the Izra (the paper of the Russian Marxist group) had been assigned to get a new and promising young theoretician who had just escaped from Siberia and whose name she had not been told, a room. She was also asked that she make sure that he was not wasting time but preparing for his first lecture in Paris. This was the only incident of her personal life that Natalia ever told me during those years (1937-38) in Mexico when Stalin was staging the monstrous Moscow Trials for which he had prepared for a decade but which Leon Trotsky had only two hours to answer, (and that only because the Mexican press would tell us what charges came over the teletype and held the presses open for Leon Trotsky to answer.)

Natalia said that she just couldn't get herself to enter Trotsky's room and deliver the message of the need to concentrate on the lecture. She therefore told the older comrade that she thought he was preparing since she had heard him whistling. Her interpretation of the whistle, however, was not accepted and she was sent back to knock on the door and speak to him. She was blushing and walking slowly toward the room when Lev Davidovitch burst out of it, almost knocking her over. It was love at first sight. She was then 21. She remained his life-long companion. Through the exile from Tsarism, and in Tsarist prisons, through the tidal waves of revolution and in power, in exile from Stalin till the tragic murder parted them.

Twice during the last, lonely, tragic decade, living with the memory of the murder of her husband and her two sons by the GPU, this great revolutionary had also to speak out against those who called themselves Trotskyists and headed the 4th International Leon Trotsky had founded. We just read her statement that is against Khrushchev and Mao Tse-tung.

The first of her statements after Trotsky's death came during the period when Tito broke from Stalin and the Trotskyists began their flirtation with him, which was soon followed up by a whitewash of the Stalinist role in the Korean war. There she fought the Trotskyists directly: "Obsessed by old and outlived formulas you continue to regard the Stalinist state as a workers' state. I cannot and will not follow you in this... In 1932 and 1933 the Stalinists, in order to justify their shameless capitulation to Hitlerism, declared that it would matter little if the Fascists came to power, because socialism would come after and through the rule of Fascism. Only dehumanized brutes without a shred of socialist thought or spirit could have argued this way. Now,

notwithstanding the revolutionary aims which animate you, you maintain that the despotic reaction which has triumphed in Eastern Europe is one of the roads through which socialism will eventually come. This view marks an irretrievable break with the profoundest convictions always held by our movement and which I continue to share... The Third World War which threatens humanity confuses the revolutionary movement with the most difficult problems, the most complex situations, the gravest decisions... Whoever defends this regime (Stalinism) of barbarous oppression, regardless of motives, abandons the principles of socialism and internationalism.**

In 1951 when she had spoken out so audaciously she had still refrained from referring to Stalinism as state-capitalism. When I had gone to see her in 1947 I must confess that, despite my great admiration for her, the thought still clung to me that her theoretical development had been willingly stifled by herself because she had subordinated everything in her life to that of Leon Trotsky. I had asked her what about her diary to which Trotsky refers (and from which he quotes in his autobiography, My Life.) I offered to help her publish it. She modestly said it was quite incomplete, that it was only done to help Leon Trotsky remember certain events that passed him by too fast and he had exaggerated the diary's value. I felt that in any case she would not publish it as she wished to take no steps that might in any way be construed differently than those Lev Davidovich would have taken.

She turned the conversation instead toward my work. Although I had broken with Trotsky over the class nature of Russia and its defense, she not only treated me as a colleague because of my past association with Trotsky, but was very interested in finding out what were the theoretical reasons for the break. She had me translate for her, word for word, the articles on the Russian revisions of Marx's theory of value.** She refused, however, to take a position on the designation of Russia as state-capitalist. She said that it was implicit in Trotsky's fight against the bureaucracy, that she felt he himself would have reached that position had he lived through to the end of the war and seen the Stalinist exploitation of Eastern Europe. But she insisted that she simply did not know enough theory to venture out on her own when Trotsky had died before coming to such a conclusion. Thus, four years later when she broke with the Trotskyist movement, she still did it on the basis of general revolutionary principles rather than any specific theory.

All this hesitation however, was gone by the time Khrushchev that obedient Stalinist in Stalin's lifetime, dared to picture himself as an anti-Stalinist when his mentor died and revolution broke out in Eastern Europe, first East Germany and then Hungary. Not having learned anything from these counter-revolutionary actions, the Trotskyists now were accepting most of the ground rules that Mao was laying down in his fight for leadership of the Communist orbit. Natalia then rose to her full stature and declared all this "state-capitalism."

* This letter was addressed to the Political Committee of the Socialist Workers Party, dated May 9, 1951 and will be republished by us in full in the February issue of News & Letters.

** American Economic Review, Sept. 1944, Sept. 1945.

which is further than Leon Trotsky ever took his analysis of the Russian bureaucracy.

The death of Natalia Sedova Trotsky marks the end of the generation that made the greatest revolution in history. It has put a period to that other great phenomenon: the role of the women in the Bolshevik movement. One has only to compare an opportunist like Furtseva, the only woman to reach, for a single year, the Political Bureau of the Russian Communist Party, with a Vera Zasulich—one of the three founders of the Russian Marxist movement—to see the class abyss that divides one from the other. I mention Zasulich rather than the one woman in the world Marxist movement that has made her mark as an original theoretician—Rosa Luxemburg—because, in memoriam of Natalia, I wish to speak of those women who had not gained theoretical leadership and therefore were very nearly disregarded except as faithful wives and mothers. Vera Zasulich, though a leader, was known for her bravery and emotions rather than for any theoretical contributions, although it was her letter to Karl Marx that had produced his answer on the special role that the mir (old Russian agricultural commune existing even in Tsarist days) might play if Russia could find a way "to skip" capitalism in her path to industrialization.

Vera Zasulich was only 16, in 1861 when she was first arrested. She was in and out of jails when she gained prominence for shooting the most hated Tsarist Governor General of St. Petersburg, Trepo, for the flogging of an imprisoned fellow student. The exciting thing was that she had turned her trial into such an exposé of the horrors of Tsarism that even in those days (1878) the jury acquitted her! She was then smuggled out to exile and it is to her place that all who escaped from Tsarism found their way—Martov, Lenin, Trotsky. She was Plekhanov's colleague when he broke with the populists, attacked terrorism, and founded Russian Marxism. Natalia told me that even when they were all convinced Marxists, that is to say, believing that only the mass movement can overthrow Tsarism or capitalism, and writing heated articles against terrorism, they would all feel so elated when some particularly hated Tsarist official was shot, that they would quietly drink to the daring terrorist who had made that attempt.

It was this type of hatred for an exploitative regime, this kind of self-sacrificing daring which would send them crossing the border back to Russia to distribute their precious literature, (and Natalia too went with these messages and found herself in jail,) the all-encompassing devotion to the movement which made it appear as if they had no personal life whatever since none of the personal life ever impinged upon the needs of the movement of liberation that created a very special kind of human being such as Natalia Sedova Trotsky.

I shall never forget the only time I ever saw Natalia cry. News came of the death of her only living son, Leon Sedoff, in Paris. I happened to have been the first to have gotten that tragic news when, as Leon Trotsky's secretary, answered the phone while we were all at the table eating lunch. I did not dare face anyone with that news. Stalin had persecuted her other son whose whereabouts we didn't know. He had persecuted Trotsky's daughters by his first wife as well as the wife herself until death by suicide or torture. And now this—I just sat through lunch, pretending that it was a wrong number, and at the end of the lunch the secretariat got together to figure out who should break the news to Leon Trotsky and who to Natalia. We all decided that only Leon Trotsky could be the bearer of such news to Natalia.

They departed to their room and in a moment came that scream. We did not see them for 8 days. The blow was the harder not only because Leon Sedoff had been their only living child, but also because he had been Trotsky's closest literary and political collaborator. When Trotsky was interned in Norway, gagged, unable to answer the monstrous charges levelled against him in the first (August 1936) Moscow Trials, Sedoff had penned Le Livre Rouge,* which, by brilliantly exposing the Moscow falsifiers, dealt an irreparable blow to the prestige of the GPU.

In the dark days . . . after the tragic news had reached us, when Leon Trotsky and Natalia were closeted in their room, Trotsky wrote the story of their son's brief life. It was the first time since pre-revolutionary days that Trotsky had written by hand.

On the eighth day Leon Trotsky emerged from his room. I was petrified at the sight of him. The neat, meticulous Leon Trotsky had not shaved for a whole week. His face was deeply lined. His eyes were swollen from so much crying. Without uttering a word, he handed me the hand-written manuscript, Leon Sedoff, Son, Friend, Fighter, which contained some of Trotsky's most poignant writing. My eyes set first on this statement, "I told Natalia of the death of our son—in the same month of February in which, 32 years ago, she brought to me in jail the news of his birth. Thus ended for us the day of February 16th, the blackest day in our personal lives... Together with our boy has died everything that still remained young within us." The pamphlet was dedicated "to the proletarian youth."

The following morning the papers carried the announcement of the Third (March 1938) Moscow Trials, scheduled to open within two short weeks of the death of Leon Sedoff. One day shortly after this Natalia went for a walk with me in the woods and there she began to cry quietly and asked me not to let Leon Trotsky know since he more than anyone needed all his strength and our help to answer these fantastic, slanderous charges from the man in the Kremlin who set on murdering the one man (Trotsky) who could still lead a revolution against the bureaucracy and restore the Russian, and thereby the international movement, to its Marxist path of liberation.

* First appeared in Russian as special issue of the Opposition Bulletin (organ of the Russian Bolshevik-Leninists,) edited by Sedoff in Paris.

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With the beginning of the Third Moscow Trials, we had to forget everything else and begin fighting the charges.

I shall remember Natalia in that one moment of tears when her thoughts were nevertheless of the movement. It so clearly expresses the personal tragedy that old Bolsheviks do not let interfere with the liberating movement that presses ever forward. I shall remember Natalia as the great revolutionary whose thoughts were as high as her devotion and she spoke out even against those who led the movement her husband had founded. I shall remember Natalia the mother who had brought up her children in the midst of all these hardships to be revolutionaries in their own right. I shall remember Natalia for the legacy she has left us all of the generation that made a revolution, saw it transformed, yet never wavered for a moment in their optimism, their principledness, and the tenderness that shone through, the hard as flint attitude toward the rulers of the world that are leading us to the nuclear holocaust.

The intercommunication through the ages will continue, for death here becomes the beacon to the future.

--Raya

(Labor donated)

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