



# The Comintern seen by the International Trotskyist Movement

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This article aims to analyze how the International Trotskyist movement dealt with the Comintern. Up to 1933, the International Trotskyist movement considered itself the Comintern left wing, an internal opposition aiming to halt the “bureaucratic degenerative process” of the Comintern and to bring it back on the “right path”, that of its first four congresses. Instead, following Hitler’s victory in 1933, the International Trotskyist movement decided to disown the Comintern due to its indirect responsibility in Hitler’s rise to power and in the debacle of German Communism. From then on, the International Trotskyist movement considered itself as a global Communist network alternative to the “Stalinized” Comintern: an alternative that officially became the Fourth International in 1938.

*Keywords:* Communist International (Comintern), Lev D. Trotsky, International Trotskyist Movement, International Left Opposition, International Communist League, Fourth International.

## Introduction

Since 1930, the Comintern was challenged by two transnational movements also referring to Marxism-Leninism: the International Union of Communist Opposition (Internationale Vereinigung der Kommunistischen Opposition, also known as International Right Opposition)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On its history see especially R.J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition. The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s*, Greenwood Press, Westport-London 1981, pp. 5-12, 278-94, and P. Broué, *Histoire de l’Internationale Communiste (1919-1943)*, Fayard, Paris 1977, pp. 551-69.

and the International Trotskyist movement, initially known (from 1930 to 1933) as International Left Opposition (Bolsheviks-Leninists), ILO<sup>2</sup>. It was an unequal competition since neither of the two oppositionist movements, despite their ramifications in various countries of the world (but especially in Europe and America), had a membership and a political weight comparable to those of that “global network of politics” from which they had split, the Communist International. Nevertheless, “orthodox” Communism did not underestimate the moves of the two “heretical” movements, especially those of the Trotskyist one<sup>3</sup>, which was the most organized and prestigious of the two since it was led by its reference leader<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, this article aims to analyze how the Comintern was faced by the leadership of the International Trotskyist movement (namely Trotsky and the International Secretariat), which, unlike the Right Opposition, had the ambition to establish a new Communist International since 1933. In this way, the Trotskyist movement placed itself directly and explicitly in competition with the Comintern. Instead, up to 1933, the ILO considered itself the Comintern left wing, an internal opposition which aimed to halt the “bureaucratic degenerative process” that, according to the Trotskyist movement, was taking place within the leadership of the Comintern and to bring it back to the “right way”, that of the Comintern first four world congresses which took place between 1919 and 1922, when Lenin was still alive and Trotsky was one of the main representatives of the Soviet government.

As Pierre Broué wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> Historiography on the International Trotskyist movement is broader than that on the International Right Opposition. Related to the Thirties, see especially Broué, *Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste*, cit., pp. 570-94; Id., *L'Opposition internationale de gauche dans le Comintern*, in *Centenaire Jules Humbert-Droz, Actes du Colloque sur l'Internationale Communiste*, La Chaux-de-Fonds, 25-28 septembre 1991, *Fondation Jules Humbert Droz*, La Chaux-de-Fonds 1992, pp. 293-317; R.J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985. A documented analysis of the movement*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 1991, pp. 251-85; M. Lequenne, *Le trotskisme. Une histoire sans fard*, Syllepse, Paris 2005, pp. 11-53; G. Mastrolillo, *La dissidenza comunista italiana, Trockij e le origini della Quarta Internazionale. 1928-1938*, Carocci, Roma, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Goloviznine, *Le mouvement trotskyste mondial dans les années 1930 vu à travers les documents internes du Comintern (Internationale communiste)*, in “*Cahiers du mouvement ouvrier*”, I, 1998, 3, pp. 21-34.

<sup>4</sup> A comparative study among the two oppositions has been made by M. Dreyfus, *Le mouvement communiste international et ses oppositions (1920-1940)*, in “*Communisme*”, 1984, 5, pp. 13-26, and also by P. Broué, *The international oppositions in the Communist International: a global overview*, in “*The International Newsletter of Communist Studies*”, XXVI-XXVII, 2018-2019, 31-32, pp. 53-84.

An *international* opposition I define as being an opposition which is based on an international programme and which carries on its activity, if not in all sections of the Comintern, at least in several, and aims to organise itself in all of them. Two oppositions fit this definition: the Left opposition and the Right opposition. The Left opposition existed as a reality for ten years<sup>5</sup>. It functioned not only as a tendency, at its beginning, but subsequently as a faction within the Comintern, and figured in all the important moments of the Comintern's history down to 1933. Born later, the Right opposition was more of a federation of groups, did not always have a clear-cut position, and gradually disappeared<sup>6</sup>.

### **The International Trotskyist movement as Comintern's internal opposition**

As a consequence of the struggle within the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)<sup>7</sup>, factions which referred to those existing in that party emerged in most of the Communist parties worldwide. Stalin's victory caused not only the expulsion of Trotsky and that of the left oppositionists from the Soviet party but, indirectly, it also led to the expulsion of their supporters from Communist parties abroad, who formed independent groupings like (to name but a few) the French Ligue Communiste – Opposition, the US Communist League of America – Opposition, the Spanish Oposición Comunista de España, the German Vereinigte Linke Opposition der Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, and the Greek<sup>8</sup> Archiomarxisti Orgánosi (“Archeiomarxist” Organization, named after its review, “Archeío Marxismou”)<sup>9</sup>.

The official foundation of the ILO took place in Paris during the so-called Preliminary Conference on 6 April 1930. A few delegates participated in this meeting, acting as representatives of the opposition groups which had been formed within the Belgian, Czechoslovakian, French,

<sup>5</sup> Broué considered 1923 as year of birth, when the Russian Left Opposition was established.

<sup>6</sup> Id., *The international oppositions in the Communist International*, cit., p. 54. See also Id., *L'Opposition internationale de gauche dans le Comintern*, cit., p. 293 and Id., *Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste*, cit., p. 450.

<sup>7</sup> Rossijskaja Kommunističeskaja Partija (bol'shevikov), since 1925 Vsesojuznaja Kommunističeskaja Partija (bol'shevikov), Communist Party of the Union (Bolshevik).

<sup>8</sup> On the formation of these groups see Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, cit., pp. 341-5, 411-3, 500-1, 681-5.

<sup>9</sup> It was the ILO biggest section due to its 2000 members. Cf. P. Broué, M. Dreyfus, *Introduction à L. Trotsky, Œuvres*, vol. II, *Juillet 1933 – Octobre 1933*, EDI, Paris 1978, p. 40.

German, Hungarian, Italian, Spanish, and US Communism<sup>10</sup>. Nobody from the Russian and the Greek oppositions could participate. For this reason, that conference was in reality a technical meeting which just proclaimed the birth of the ILO and reformed the International Secretariat (IS)<sup>11</sup>, provisionally created in the previous March<sup>12</sup> and initially *composed* by Alfred Rosmer, Max Shachtman, and Trotsky's son Leon Sedov<sup>13</sup>.

During the Preliminary Conference, the delegates wrote an open letter<sup>14</sup>, *Aux prolétaires du monde!* It was a propaganda appeal that denounced the critical political and economic situation in the capitalistic countries and especially the domestic crisis of both the Soviet Union and the Comintern caused by the policies of the Stalinist regime. Moreover, it presented the ILO as the only international Marxist-Leninist organization, which addressed «à tous les communistes et aux ouvriers du monde» in order to gain their support and bring the Comintern back to the line of its first four world congresses<sup>15</sup>.

The ILO succeeded in fulfilling another conference in three years. Its second conference (known as Preconference because it was set up as a technical meeting in view of a real international conference) took place in Paris from 4 to 8 February 1933 in the presence of Belgian, British, French, German, Greek, Italian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and

<sup>10</sup> Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge (US-MA) [hereafter HLHU], *Leon Trotsky Exile Papers* (MS Russ 13.1), 16421-16526, *Séance du Secrétariat International du 6 avril 1930*, participants: Alfred Rosmer (André A. Griot) and Pierre Naville from France; Adhémarr Hennaut and Léon Lesoil from Belgium; Max Shachtman from the United States; Jan Frankel from Czechoslovakia; Peri (Giovanni Bottaioli) and Severino from Italy; Julián Gorkin from Spain; Oscar Seipold from Germany; Obin and Pikas from the Jewish Group inside the French Ligue Communiste; Karoly Silvassy (Szilvassy) from Hungary; president: Rosmer (Griot), secretary: Gérard (Gérard Rosenthal).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. I. Deutscher, *Il profeta esiliato (Trotsky 1929-1940)*, Longanesi, Milano 1965, p. 668; C. Gras, *Alfred Rosmer (1877-1964) et le mouvement révolutionnaire international*, Maspero, Paris 1971, p. 362; D. Durand, *Opposants à Staline*, vol. II, in "Cahiers Leon Trotsky", X, 1988, 33, p. 222.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Durand, *Opposants à Staline*, vol. II, cit., pp. 182, 197-9.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. P. Broué, *La rivoluzione perduta. Vita di Lev Trockij*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1991, p. 628.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, cit., pp. 254-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Aux prolétaires du monde!*, in "Bulletin international de l'Opposition Communiste de gauche", I, 1930, 1, pp. 1-3, then, entitled *Appel aux prolétaires du monde!*, in *Les congrès de la IV<sup>e</sup> Internationale (manifestes, thèses, résolutions)*, vol. I, *Naissance de la IV<sup>e</sup> Internationale (1930-1940)*, seconde édition revue et augmentée, textes intégraux rassemblés et présentés par R. Prager, avec la collaboration de J-F. Godchau, C. Rossi et H. Véga, Éditions La Brèche, Paris 1978, pp. 40-8.

US delegates<sup>16</sup>. Trotsky could not participate but he wrote a paper, *The International Left Opposition, Its Tasks and Methods*, adopted by the ILO during the Preconference. The main part of this document concerns the ILO principles, divided into eleven points that clarify Trotsky's (and therefore ILO's) criticisms of Soviet regime policies and indirectly of the line followed by the Comintern leadership, "guilty" of not contesting but rather supporting that policies. Namely, the line followed towards the Kuomintang in the years 1924-1928 and the Anglo-Russian Union Committee are condemned, together with the Stalinist theory «of two-class (worker-and-peasant) parties» and that of Socialism in one country, «the theory of *social fascism*», and the Stalinist economic policy «both in its stage of *economic opportunism* in 1923 to 1928 [...] as well as in its stage of *economic adventurism* in 1928 to 1932». Moreover, «the formula of the "*democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry*" as a separate regime distinguished from the *dictatorship of the proletariat*» is rejected, while the necessity to develop the «*party democracy*» and to condemn «the Stalinist plebiscitary regime» are also pointed out. Both «the *permanent character of the proletarian revolution*» and that «of the *Soviet state as a workers' state*» are also reaffirmed. The «necessity of systematic Communist work in the proletarian mass organizations, particularly on the reformist trade unions», «the necessity to mobilize the masses under *transitional slogans* corresponding to the concrete situation in each country, and particularly under *democratic slogans*», and «the necessity of a developed *united-front policy*» are also highlighted. Last but not least, it is reiterated that the ILO considered itself the Comintern left wing, aiming «to tear the banner of Bolshevism out of the hands of the usurping bureaucracy and return the Communist International to the principles of Marx and Lenin»<sup>17</sup>.

Furthermore, the Preconference decided to send a telegram to the Comintern urging it to organize urgently its 7<sup>th</sup> World Congress (in which also the ILO had to participate) and to lay the groundwork for an international united front with the ILO, the Labor and Socialist Inter-

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, cit., p. 256; Y. Craipeau, *Le mouvement trotskyste en France. Des origines aux enseignements de mai 68*, Editions Syros, Paris 1971, pp. 77-8.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. [L. Trotsky], *The International Left Opposition, its Tasks and Methods*, in *Documents of the Fourth International. The Formative Years (1933-40)*, W. Reisner (ed.), Pathfinder, New York 1973, pp. 19-43: 23-5, also in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1932-33)*, G. Breitman and S. Lovell (eds.), Pathfinder, New York 1972, pp. 48-63, French translation *L'Opposition de gauche internationale, ses tâches et méthodes, in Les congrès de la IVE Internationale (manifestes, thèses, résolutions)*, vol. I, cit., pp. 57-81.

national (LSI), the Profintern, and the International Federation of Trade Unions for common action against Nazism as well as for the defense of the Soviet Union<sup>18</sup>, but Moscow did not answer the call.

### Hitler's victory and the "independentist turn"

The appointment of Hitler as German chancellor on 30 January 1933 after the electoral triumph of the National-Socialist Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei) was an event that also marked a point of no return in the history of the International Trotskyist movement. Indirectly, in fact, the Communist Party of Germany (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD) contributed to the success of the far-right because, according to the Comintern guidelines, it termed the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD) as Social-Fascist and consequently it rejected the possibility of a Communist-Socialist united front against Nazism. Thus, the KPD had given evidence of demagogy<sup>19</sup> and had underestimated the danger represented by the Nazi party<sup>20</sup>, whose victory was, according to Trotsky, the «Fourth of August» of Stalinism, or rather its bankruptcy<sup>21</sup>. As is known, the reference is to 4 August 1914, when the SPD voted for the war credits in the Reichstag. In this way, it implicitly approved the German military efforts<sup>22</sup>, like other Social-Democratic parties (such as the French one, Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière, SFIO) did. In this way, according to the Bolsheviks and European Maximalists, the bankruptcy of the Second International happened because it was not able to avoid that Social-Patriotic deviation<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison (US-WI), *James P. Cannon Papers* (MSS 839), box 20, folder 11, A. Swaback, *Report of Preliminary International Conference International Left Opposition (Bolshevik Leninist)*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. O.K. Flechtheim, *Il partito comunista tedesco (KPD) nel periodo della Repubblica di Weimar*, introduzione di H. Weber, Jaca Book, Milano 1970, pp. 291-3, 298-9.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. M. Hájek, *Storia dell'Internazionale Comunista (1921-1935). La politica del fronte unico*, prefazione di E. Ragionieri, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1972, p. 191.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. [L. Trotsky], *Le 4 août*, 4 June 1933, in L. Trotsky, *Œuvres*, vol. I, *Mars 1933 – juillet 1933*, introduction et notes de P. Broué et M. Dreyfus, EDI, Paris 1978, pp. 197-201, English translation *The Fourth of August*, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1932-33)*, cit., pp. 258-61.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. J. Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 156, 159-60.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. A.S. Lindemann, *Socialismo europeo e bolscevismo (1919-1921)*, il Mulino, Bologna 1977, pp. 70-2.

The absence of official reactions by the Comintern (which «continuerà per oltre un anno a negare la sconfitta, considerandola addirittura il preannuncio di una prossima vittoria comunista in Germania», as Antonio Moscato wrote)<sup>24</sup> was what convinced Trotsky of the necessity to establish not only a new German Communist party, but also a new International and new Communist parties<sup>25</sup>. As Trotsky stated in July 1933, the Third International had proved to be irremediably compromised because it had subordinated the prospect of the world revolution to the Thermidorean interests of Moscow's bureaucrats<sup>26</sup>. Consequently,

The Left Opposition ceases completely to feel and act as an "opposition". It becomes an independent organization, clearing its own road. It now only builds its own fractions in the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties, but conducts independent work among nonparty and unorganized workers. It creates its own bases of support in the trade unions, independently of the trade-union policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy. It participates in elections under its own banner, whenever favorable conditions for this obtain. In relation to reformist and centrist labor organizations (including the Stalinists) it is guided by the general principles of the united-front policy. In particular, it applies the policy of the united front especially in order to defend the USSR against external intervention and internal counterrevolution<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> A. Moscato, *Andrés Nin e la Rivoluzione spagnola*, introduzione ad A. Nin, *Terra e libertà. Scritti sulla Rivoluzione spagnola (1931-1937)*, Erre emme, Roma 1996, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. M. Dreyfus, *I socialisti di sinistra e la Quarta Internazionale*, in "Critica comunista", I, 1979, 4-5, p. 142.

<sup>26</sup> International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam [hereafter IISH], *Lev Davidovič Trockij / International Left Opposition Archives*, inv. 851, *Résolution*. See also [L. Trotsky], *It Is Impossible to Remain in the Same "International" with Stalin*, *Manuilsky, Lozovsky and Company. A Conversation*, 20 July 1933, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1933-34)*, G. Breitman and B. Scott (eds.), Pathfinder, New York 1972, pp. 17-24, also in L. Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, G. Breitman and M. Maisel (eds.), with an introduction by E. Mandel, Pathfinder Press, New York 1971, pp. 427-35, French translation *Il est impossible de rester dans la même Internationale que Staline*, *Manuilsky, Lozovsky et Cie*, in Trotsky, *Œuvres*, vol. I, cit., pp. 275-84; [Id.], *For New Communist Parties and the New International*, 27 July 1933, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1933-34)*, cit., pp. 26-7, French translation *Pour de nouveaux partis et une nouvelle Internationale*, in Trotsky, *Œuvres*, vol. II, cit., pp. 48-50, and [Id.], *Il faut tourner sur la question de l'Internationale...*, letter by Trotsky to the IS, 7 August 1933, in Trotsky, *Œuvres*, vol. II, cit., pp. 66-70.

<sup>27</sup> G. Gourov [L. Trotsky], *It Is Necessary to Build Communist Parties and an International Anew*, 15 July 1933, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1932-33)*, cit., p. 311, French translation *Il faut construire de nouveau des Partis communistes et une nouvelle Internationale*, in Trotsky, *Œuvres*, vol. I, cit., pp. 251-60.

From then on, the ILO officially became an international Communist network alternative to the Comintern, which was considered at that point hopelessly subjugated to Stalinist bureaucracy and hence unable to correctly lead the global Communism movement. Therefore, according to the ILO, it was necessary to replace the Comintern with a new International, the Fourth. For this reason, it is possible to label this turn as “independentist”<sup>28</sup>. However, it did not entail a change of judgment concerning the Soviet Union, which was still considered, «malgré toutes les perversions bureaucratiques et une fausse politique économique [...], l'état de la socialisation [sic] de la terre, des fabriques, des usines, et de la collectivisation de l'économie paysanne», as stated by the IS in a letter addressed to the ILO national sections<sup>29</sup>.

In 1986, in an article published in “Soviet Studies”, John A. Getty tried to explain why Trotsky promoted that turn. Getty wondered why between the disownment of the KPD and that of the Comintern passed four months. He argued that between 1932 and 1933 secret contacts between Trotsky, Karl Radek, some Grigory Zinoviev's followers, and other opponents to Stalin (the Lominadze Group) took place in order to try to create an International Unified Opposition. This scenario came to nothing due to the arrest of most opponents. At the same time, in two letters sent to the Soviet party's *Politbjuro* in March and May 1933, Trotsky proposed to rejoin the Soviet party due to the critical Soviet political situation and the German political catastrophe. According to him, indeed, this scenario should obligate both the Stalinists and the Trotskyists to appeal to the sense of responsibility in order to try to build political unity inside the Comintern and its sections. Consequently, the ILO had to be considered officially the Comintern left fraction. Trotsky's letters did not receive an answer and this fact convinced him of the need of officially disavowing the Comintern and promoting the turn towards the Fourth International<sup>30</sup>.

Thomas Twiss replied to Getty in another article and argued that the four months between the two disownments depended on Trotsky's wish to avoid a split between his followers, a scenario that could be carried out due to the radicalism of the turn promoted. Moreover, Twiss criti-

<sup>28</sup> I do not know if anyone else before me named this turn in this way; I did not find this definition neither in historiography nor in contemporary papers.

<sup>29</sup> IISH, *Lev Davidovič Trockij / International Left Opposition Archives*, inv. 832, letter by the IS to the ILO national sections, 8 July 1933.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. J.A. Getty, *Trotsky in Exile: the Founding of the Fourth International*, in “Soviet Studies”, XXXVIII, 1986, 1, pp. 27-31.



cized Getty's interpretations of the letters sent by Trotsky to the *Politburo*: according to Twiss, in fact, in these papers Trotsky simply requested that the Comintern officially recognized as domestic fractions the ILO and its sections. Therefore, Trotsky chose to wait four months in case demands for the radical reform of the Comintern emerged from within that same organization. This scenario did not take place and, consequently, Trotsky decided to carry out that turn<sup>31</sup>.

The need to establish a new International was enunciated during the Plenum (plenary meeting of the IS and the delegates of the main ILO sections) which took place in Paris on 19-21 August 1933<sup>32</sup> in the presence of the Belgian Georges Vereeken, the Czechoslovakian Jan Frankel, the Frenchmen Pierre Frank and Raymond Molinier, the German Erwin H. Ackerknecht, the Greek Mitsos Yotopoulos, the Italians Alfonso Leonetti and Pietro Tresso, and the Russian Sedov<sup>33</sup>. In that session, they decided to approve the "independentist turn" and rename the ILO to International (or Internationalist) Communist League (Bolsheviks-Leninists), ICL<sup>34</sup>. For this reason, the tenth of the eleven points adopted during the Preconference was modified and its new version specified that the constitution of a new International was the main goal of the International Trotskyist movement<sup>35</sup>.

### **From the 7th World Congress of the Comintern to its dissolution**

The turn towards the popular fronts' policy which was carried out during the 7<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the Comintern (Moscow, 25 July – 21 August 1935) caused another friction between the International Trotskyist movement and the Comintern. Due to the turn, Trotsky and the IS considered the 7<sup>th</sup> World Congress the point of no return in the history of the Comintern itself, its «liquidation congress»<sup>36</sup>, which had carried out a

<sup>31</sup> Cf. T. Twiss, *Trotsky's Break with the Comintern: A Comment on J. Arch Getty*, ivi, XXXIX, 1987, 1, pp. 131-7.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Le Plénum de l'Opposition internationale (19-21 août 1933)*, in *Les congrès de la IVe Internationale (manifestes, thèses, résolutions)*, vol I, cit., p. 90.

<sup>33</sup> IISH, *Lev Davidovič Trockiĭ / International Left Opposition Archives*, inv. 849, *Plenum de l'O.G.I. (Bolch-Len)*.

<sup>34</sup> IISH, *Ligue Communiste (France) Archives*, inv. 43, *Procès-verbal du Plenum (Aout 1933)*, pp. 1-2, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Le Plénum de l'Opposition internationale*, cit., pp. 92-3.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. L.T. [L. Trotsky], *The Comintern's Liquidation Congress, 23 August 1935*, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1935-36)*, N. Allen and G. Breitman (eds.), Pathfinder Press, New York 1977, pp. 84-94: 84, 91, French translation *Le congrès de la liquidation de l'Internationale*

break «with the last remnants of Comintern traditions», as well as another demonstration of the necessity to create a new International. Another element that supported this conclusion was the Stalin-Laval Pact (Paris, 2 May 1935)<sup>37</sup> which was considered by the IS a *coup de grace* to the Third International, a capitulation to the imperialistic world due to the weakening of the revolutionary pressure in the world<sup>38</sup>. According to one of the main IS leaders, Leonetti<sup>39</sup>, the pact demonstrated that at this point Stalin only acted in order to fulfill Soviet interests and not also those of the International workers movement. Moreover, Leonetti pointed out that the agreement was unnecessary because in 1935 the Soviet Union was not still a “besieged fortress” by imperialism and the hypothesis of a revolutionary outcome of European masses’ radicalization (especially the French one) was once again a concrete possibility. As stated by him, that

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*communiste*, in L. Trotsky, *Cŕuvres*, vol. VI, *Juin 1935 – septembre 1935*, introduction et notes de P. Broué et M. Dreyfus, EDI, Paris 1979, pp. 157-70.

<sup>37</sup> *The Evolution of the Comintern*, in *Documents of the Fourth International*, cit., p. 126, French translation *L'évolution de l'Internationale communiste: de parti de la révolution mondiale, en instrument de l'impérialisme (étude)*, in *Les congrès de la IVe Internationale (manifestes, thèses, résolutions)*, vol. I, cit., pp. 155-73.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. [IS], *Stalin has signed the death certificate of the Third International. An open letter to the world proletariat*, 25 May 1935, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1934-35)*, G. Breitman and B. Scott (eds.), Pathfinder Press, New York – London – Montreal – Sydney 2002, p. 390-1, 398, 400, French translation *Staline a signé l'acte de décès de la IIIe Internationale*, in L. Trotsky, *Cŕuvres*, vol. V, *Janvier 1935 – juin 1935*, introduction et notes de P. Broué et M. Dreyfus, EDI, Paris 1979, pp. 301-13. On Trotsky's opinion over the popular fronts see especially J.-P. Joubert, *Trockij e il Fronte popolare*, in D. Bidussa, A. Chitarin (a cura di), *Trockij nel movimento operaio del XX secolo*, “Il Ponte”, XXXVI, 1980, 11-12, pp. 1332-54; L. Rapone, *Trockij e i fronti popolari*, in F. Gori (a cura di), *Pensiero e azione politica di Lev Trockij*, Atti del convegno internazionale per il quarantesimo anniversario della morte promosso dalla Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli e organizzato dalla Regione Toscana con la collaborazione della Biblioteca comunale di Follonica (Follonica, 7-11 ottobre 1980), vol. II, Olschki, Firenze 1982, pp. 417-8; P. Le Blanc, *Leon Trotsky*, Reaktion Books, London 2015, pp. 105-6.

<sup>39</sup> A former national leader of the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista d'Italia, since 1943 known as Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) between 1926 to 1930, then (from 1930 to 1936, but officially to 1937) a member of the IS. In 1935 he began to distance himself from Trotskyism and to slowly reconcile with “orthodox” Communism. This process led to his adhesion to the PCI in 1962. On his role inside the Partito Comunista d'Italia see G. Mastrolillo, *Alfonso Leonetti nel socialismo e nel comunismo italiano (1913-1930)*, prefazione di G. Corni, Cacucci, Bari 2018. On his role inside the IS see G. Telloli, *Alfonso Leonetti dans le SI de l'Opposition de gauche et de la L.C.I.*, in *Communisme et oppositions en Italie*, special issue of “Cahiers Léon Trotsky”, IX, 1987, 29, pp. 18-42, and Mastrolillo, *La dissidenza comunista italiana*, cit., *passim*. On his reconciliation with the PCI and his readmission see Id., *Alfonso Leonetti e il gruppo dirigente del Pci dalla destalinizzazione alla segreteria Natta*, in “Italia contemporanea”, XLVIII, 2021, 296, pp. 38-62.

scenario represented a danger for Stalin's policy because it could have led to the birth of a new revolutionary center unaligned with Moscow; consequently, the Soviet dictator had decided to sign that pact which reinforced the bourgeoisie of France in place of its proletariat<sup>40</sup>.

As Miloš Hájek clearly explained:

All'epoca della "teoria del socialfascismo" Trotskij aveva sottoposto l'orientamento del Comintern a una severa critica e aveva esaltato, come alternativa, la politica del fronte unico. Non appena però l'Internazionale comunista tornò seriamente alla politica del fronte unico, ampliandola in vasta misura, egli cominciò a criticarla da sinistra. Insisteva sui limiti categorici che al fronte unico erano stati tracciati all'inizio degli anni venti, e condannava ogni caso in cui venivano superati [...]. Contro il fronte popolare, poi, Trotskij aveva dissentito in via di principio. Lo definiva una coalizione tra proletariato e borghesia imperialista<sup>41</sup>.

The attitude that the ICL had to adopt towards the popular fronts' policy and especially towards the French one split the IS. The issue was discussed during the session that took place in Paris on 12 July 1935 in the presence of Martin (Leonetti), Dubois (the German Elfriede Eisler *alias* Ruth Fischer), Clart (the French Jean Rous), and Nicolle (the German Erwin Wolf). Rous<sup>42</sup> considered the Front «la renaissance de l'ancien cartel des gauches, avec les mêmes combine des illusions parlementaires et électorales» and (supported by Wolf) claimed that the ICL had to stand out as an enemy of the *Front populaire*<sup>43</sup> in order to avoid being considered jointly-responsible for its defeat, deemed inevitable<sup>44</sup>. Instead, Leonetti affirmed that:

<sup>40</sup> Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Milano, *Fondo Alfonso Leonetti*, serie Documenti, cont. 2, Feroci [A. Leonetti], *L'Internazionale comunista e il social-patriottismo*, typewritten Italian translation of *The Comintern and Social Patriotism*, in "The New International", II, 1935, 7, pp. 234-6.

<sup>41</sup> Hájek, *Storia dell'Internazionale comunista*, cit., pp. 291-2.

<sup>42</sup> A former member of the SFIO, in 1934 he joined the Ligue Communiste and became one of the leaders of French Trotskyism, whose moves he followed until 1944, when he rejoined the SFIO until 1948 and later from 1956 to 1959, when he participated to the establishment of the Parti Socialiste Autonome. Instead, in 1972 he joined the Parti Socialiste and became a member of its Executive Committee. On his political activity see especially J. Rous, D. Gauthiez, *Un homme de l'ombre*, Éditions Cana – Jean Offredo, Paris 1983.

<sup>43</sup> *Trotsky et le Front populaire. Procès-verbal du S.I. du 12 juillet 1935*, in "Cahiers Léon Trotsky", IV, 1982, 9, pp. 89-91.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Joubert, *Trockij e il Fronte popolare*, cit., p. 1340.

Le Front populaire est le seul mouvement réel actuellement, il existe, on ne peut pas le combattre. Il faut se mettre sur la base du Front populaire pour le transformer par une critique vigoureuse [...]. Les masses petites-bourgeoises [*sic*] se tourneront vers les fascistes, si elles ne sont pas attirées par l'action du prolétariat [...]. Il faut développer, continuer le mouvement, le pousser sous le mot d'ordre: Le Front populaire au pouvoir! [...] Il s'agit de combattre l'union avec les Kuomintang français, mais aussi de conclure une alliance avec elle<sup>45</sup>.

The Comintern was not thrown officially into the focus of the debates neither during the Conference for the Fourth International organized by the ICL (Paris, 29-31 July 1936), when this organization became the Movement for the Fourth International, nor during the Founding Conference of the Fourth International (officially named World Party of Socialist Revolution), which took place in Périgny-sur-Yerres (near Paris) on 3 September 1938. The Trotskyist reflectors enlightened it again after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Moscow, 23 August 1939), which had been predicted by Trotsky already in 1933, although in broad terms. In 1939, he affirmed that the tactical «zigzags» caused by the Comintern incoherent policy produced only chaos within the working class and would have facilitated the victory of Fascism in the upcoming war<sup>46</sup>. Furthermore, Trotsky considered the Communist International «the first victim of the German-Soviet pact [...]. It is being forsaken from one side by the patriots and from the other by the internationalists». Moreover, according to him, the dissolution of the Comintern (an event that Trotsky believed inevitable) «will not fail to deal an irreparable blow to the authority of the ruling caste in the consciousness of the broad masses of the Soviet Union itself»<sup>47</sup>.

Shortly before the beginning of the Second World War, the IS<sup>48</sup> and also the International Executive Committee (IEC) elected during

<sup>45</sup> *Trotsky et le Front populaire. Procès-verbal du S.I. du 12 juillet 1935*, cit., pp. 90-1. See also P. Broué, *Trotsky et la IVe Internationale*, in Gori (a cura di), *Pensiero e azione politica di Lev Trockij*, vol. II, cit., p. 515.

<sup>46</sup> [L. Trotsky], *The German-Soviet Alliance*, 4 September 1939, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1939-40)*, N. Allen and G. Breitman (eds.), Pathfinder Press, New York 1973, p. 83, French translation *Le Pacte germano-soviétique*, in L. Trotsky, *Œuvres*, vol. XXI, *Avril 1939 à septembre 1939*, introduction et notes de P. Broué, Institut Léon Trotsky, Paris 1986, pp. 389-92.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. [L. Trotsky], *Stalin – Hitler's Quartermaster*, 2 September 1939, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1939-40)*, cit., pp. 76, 80, French translation *Staline, intendant de Hitler*, in Trotsky, *Œuvres*, vol. XXI, cit., pp. 382-8.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. V. Luparello, *Los trotskistas bajo el terror nazi. La IV Internacional en la Segunda*

the Founding Conference moved to New York, since by the end of the Thirties the main section of the Fourth International was the US one, named Socialist Workers Party (SWP). For this reason, the so-called Emergency Conference of the Fourth International took place in New York from 19 to 26 May 1940. The aim was to elect a new international direction, to give a first appraisal of the new world conflict, and to try to resolve the discussion which started inside the SWP where a minority, led by Shachtman, criticized the position of unconditional defense of the USSR that the Fourth International kept defending despite the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact<sup>49</sup>. Delegates representing the Argentine, Belgian, Canadian, Chilean, Cuban, German, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Spanish, and US sections participated in the Emergency Conference<sup>50</sup>, where the Fourth International adopted a paper written by Trotsky and co-signed also by the main leaders of the Fourth International, the *Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution*. The document stated that the Comintern policy (defined as «a mixture of crude opportunism and unbridled adventurism») had carried out an influence on the working class which was «even more demoralizing than the policy of its elder brother, the Second International». Furthermore, the manifesto condemned not only the turn carried out by the Comintern following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, when it had «suddenly discovered [...] the criminal imperialism of the Western democracies», but also the lack of a public stance made by the Comintern against the German invasion of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, and Norway<sup>51</sup>.

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*Guerra Mundial*, Ariadna, Santiago de Chile 2021, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, p. 30. See also [W. Reisner], *Editorial Note, Part Five*, in *Documents of the Fourth International*, cit., p. 305 but especially S. Di Giuliomaria, *Prefazione a L.D. Trotsky, In difesa del marxismo*, a cura di S. Di Giuliomaria, Samonà e Savelli, Roma 1969, pp. 12-6, and G. Novack, *Introduction to J.P. Cannon, The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*, J.G. Wright (ed.) and with a new introduction by G. Novack, Pathfinder, New York – London – Montreal – Sydney 2000, pp. 10-2 and, generally, all these two volumes which contain the correspondence between Trotsky and the SWP leadership on the domestic dispute and the related documents.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *The Emergency Conference of the Fourth International*, in *Documents of the Fourth International*, cit., pp. 306-10: 306, French translation *Présentation*, in *Les congrès de la IVe Internationale (manifestes, thèses, résolutions)*, vol. I, cit., pp. 332-7.

<sup>51</sup> [L. Trotsky], *Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution*, in *Documents of the Fourth International*, cit., pp. 336-8, also, entitled *Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution*, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1939-40)*, cit., pp. 208-10, French translation *Manifeste: la guerre impérialiste et la révolution prolétarienne mondiale*, in *Les congrès de la IVe Internationale (manifestes, thèses,*

Following the dissolution of the Comintern carried out in May 1943, the IEC provided another manifesto where it emphasized that this decision was taken by the Comintern and the leadership of the Communist parties without consulting their membership. This choice was considered by the IEC another demonstration of the real nature of the Comintern: «a totalitarian instrument in the hands of a clique alien to the interests of world proletariat». The dissolution was also defined as «a vicious attack against proletarian internationalism» as well as the last demonstration of the Comintern subjugation to the *desiderata* of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which transformed it «from an organization of world revolution into a mere instrument of Kremlin foreign policy, a mere body guard of the Soviet Union». According to the IEC, Stalin's decision to dissolve the Comintern was comparable to what the leaders of the Second International did concerning the Socialist one and was also considered «the latest episode in the Kremlin's concessions to the capitalist world». Therefore, after the dissolution, the IEC stated that there was only one Communist International, the Fourth, ready to lead the world proletariat «for the world revolution», the only one labor International which had succeeded in surviving the world war since even the LSI «had given no sign of life, lacking even the energy to bury itself»<sup>52</sup>.

The Second World War made the contacts between the IS and the European sections very difficult; for this reason, in January 1942 the first European Secretariat was founded in the Belgian Ardennes in order to coordinate the activity of the European sections and it was headquartered in Paris. In summer 1943, this Secretariat was succeeded by another one, called Provisional European Secretariat (PES), led by Michel Pablo (the Greek Michalis N. Raptis) and also located in Paris<sup>53</sup>. Also the PES composed a manifesto concerning the dissolution of the

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*résolutions*), vol. I, cit., pp. 337-80. The document was signed by Crux (Trotsky), Fischer (Otto Schüssler), Martel (James P. Cannon), Jones (Vincent R. Dunne), and the IEC administrative secretary Stuart (Sam Gordon).

<sup>52</sup> The Executive Committee of the World Party of Socialist Revolution (Fourth International), *Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Dissolution of the Comintern*, 12 June 1943, in "Fourth International", IV, 1943, 7, pp. 195-9, French translation *Manifeste: Sur la dissolution du Komintern*, in *Les congrès de la IVe Internationale (manifestes, thèses, résolutions)*, vol. II, *L'Internationale dans la guerre (1940-1946)*, textes rassemblés, introduits et préfacés par R. Prager, Editions La Brèche, Paris 1981, pp. 72-86. See also Luparello, *Los trotskistas bajo el terror nazi*, cit., pp. 109-12.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, cit., pp. 297-8; [Prager], *Introduction*, in *Les congrès de la IVe Internationale (manifestes, thèses, résolutions)*, vol. II, cit., pp. 113-5.

Comintern. In this document, it affirmed that Stalin had transformed it in «un instrument passif dans les mains de Moscou» and allowed «elements les plus mediocres et les plus serviles» to manage the Comintern national sections. In this way, the Comintern became «un instrument diplomatique pur et simple dont l'orientation change selon les manœuvres tortueuses du Kremlin». Stalin tried to justify in a Marxist-Leninist way his decision to dissolve the Comintern, but the PES considered his explanations cynical falsifications of history. According to it, in fact, a Communist International was necessary not only «pour établir dans la lutte l'unité de front du prolétariat des différents pays contre la bourgeoisie» but also because «à l'époque du capitalisme financier l'organisation de la production forme un tout à l'échelle mondiale». The PES considered what happened concerning the Comintern a Stalinist capitulation to US imperialism, which aimed to wear out the revolutionary movement worldwide. Therefore, Stalin could be deemed as colluded with the imperialist and capitalist powers and therefore a traitor of the Socialist cause. Moreover, the PES stated that the dissolution of the Comintern was the prologue to that of the Communist parties, which would dissolve into the reformist ones despite the will of the masses, ready to the revolutionary action in different countries. For this reason, they needed a genuine international, revolutionary leadership which at that time did not lack, according to the PES: it was, in fact, the Fourth International, ready to lead the world proletariat towards its emancipation and the construction of the United Socialist States of the World<sup>54</sup>.

### Conclusion

As stated above, Trotsky and the IS tried to create a global network alternative to Stalinism (which meant, since 1933, to the Comintern) with a specific ideological platform based especially on the theory of permanent revolution, the united front policy, and the party democracy, which lacked (according to Trotsky) inside the Comintern and its sections. Moreover, Trotsky and his supporters considered the USSR a workers state, although degenerated, to be defended to the bitter end, while the Stalinist propaganda painted the Trotskyists as enemies of the USSR and agents of Nazi-Fascism, but it was Stalin and not Trotsky

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<sup>54</sup> Le Secrétariat européen de la IV<sup>e</sup> Internationale, *Manifeste: Staline dissout le Komintern. La IV<sup>e</sup> Internationale mènera le prolétariat à la victoire!*, June 1943, in *Les congrès de la IV<sup>e</sup> Internationale (manifestes, thèses, résolutions)*, vol. II, cit., pp. 145-8, 150, 153-7, 159, 162.

who made a deal with Hitler. It was precisely this pact that exacerbated the contrast between the Third and the Fourth International because the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact obliged the Comintern to revise its politics towards Nazi Germany<sup>55</sup>, a country which the International Trotskyist movement always considered the main enemy of the Labor movement. Furthermore, the German-Soviet Pact marked an important occasion for the Fourth International to try to emerge as a real alternative to the Comintern due to the shock caused by the pact within International Communism because of the already reminded change of judgment concerning Nazi Germany. Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 was what forced Stalin and the Comintern to carry out another “turn” and to slowly come back to the Anti-Fascist policy<sup>56</sup>. This change allowed Stalinism to confirm its consensus among International Communism and its leadership on it, to the detriment of Trotskyism.

The fall of the Comintern also seemed to open up a new favorable scenario for the Fourth International, but its rise to the leadership of the world proletariat did not happen due to the victory of the Soviet Union in the Second World War. This allowed the USSR to become a world power and therefore to present its policy and its “version” of Communism as successful in the immediate post-war period, at the expense of the Fourth International, which instead remained a propaganda organization without a real influence over the masses also due to the fact that it lacked a solid leadership with a prestige comparable to that of Trotsky. Of course, the Fourth International had leaders of great substance like James P. Cannon, Livio Maitan, and Ernest Mandel (to name but a few), but nobody succeeded in creating a solid and authoritative leadership able to avoid other splits like the one which happened in 1940 inside the main section of the Fourth International, the SWP, and those happened in 1953 and in 1962<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. F. Claudín, *La crisi del movimento comunista. Dal Comintern al Cominform*, prefazione di J. Semprún, Feltrinelli, Milano 1974, pp. 234-8; N. Lebedeva, M. Narinskij, *Il Komintern e la seconda guerra mondiale*, prefazione di S. Pons, Guerra, Perugia 1996, pp. 21-2, 29; Broué, *L'Internationale Communiste*, cit., pp. 735-6; K. McDermott, J. Agnew, *The Comintern. A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, Macmillan, Basingstoke-London 1996, pp. 192-4; S. Wolikow, *L'Internazionale comunista. Il sogno infranto del partito mondiale della rivoluzione (1919-43)*, Carocci, Roma 2016, pp. 170-2.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Claudín, *La crisi del movimento comunista*, cit., pp. 239-40; Lebedeva, Narinskij, *Il Komintern e la seconda guerra mondiale*, cit., pp. 82-9; Wolikow, *L'Internazionale comunista*, cit., pp. 206-7.

<sup>57</sup> In November 1953, the majority of the French section (Parti Communiste



In conclusion, the competition with the Comintern and, since 1943, with the pro-Soviet Communism (which since that year lacked an International organization except for the Cominform) was always unbalanced at the expense of the Fourth International due to the unlimited support that the Comintern received from the USSR, the notoriety of the popular fronts' policy, and the rise of the USSR to the rank of world power following its victory over Nazi-Fascism. Last but not least, the fact that no one of the parties linked to the Fourth International succeeded in taking the power and establish a solid government which could carry out the role that the USSR had towards the Comintern was the gravest failure of the Fourth International, which remained a Catharism without its Albi, an "heresy" which lacked its own stronghold, unlike, for example, another "heresy": Titoism. Following the Stalin-Tito Split of June 1948 (which at first raised strong expectations within the Fourth International leadership)<sup>58</sup>, in fact, «per la prima volta si concretizzava la possibilità di dare a un'eresia una solida base territoriale», as Jože Pirjevec wrote<sup>59</sup>. Moreover, as stated by Paolo Spriano:

Un'analogia con il caso Trockij e il destino delle opposizioni bolsceviche degli anni trenta non è priva di suggestione. Se nel 1936-38, per realizzare la propria tirannide personale, Stalin «demonizzava» Trockij, ora, con il giugno del 1948, il diavolo diventa Tito. Come allora si diceva che Trockij non era ormai più il

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Internationaliste) led by Pierre Lambert, the British section ("The Club" inside the Labour Party) led by Gerry Healy, the Swiss one (Sozialistische Arbeiterbundes), and the SWP split and established the International Committee of the Fourth International because they disagreed with Pablo's policies carried out since the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Congress of the Fourth International held in Paris in August 1951. Instead, in January 1962, some Latin-American sections created a tendency, led by the Argentine Juan Posadas (Homero Rómulo Cristalli Frasnelli), which split because it wanted that the Fourth International had to focus its policy especially on the support for the colonial revolutions. A part of the secessionist organizations (the SWP and the Swiss section) joined again the Fourth International during its 7<sup>th</sup> World Congress held in Rome in June 1963. Cf. P. Frank, *The Long March of the Trotskyists. Contributions to the history of the Fourth International* [1969], introduction by M. Colle, International Institute for Research & Education – Resistance Books, Amsterdam-London 2010, pp. 78-80, 87-8, 93-6; Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, cit., pp. 321-5, 330-4; L. Maitan, *Per una storia della IV Internazionale. La testimonianza di un comunista controcorrente*, prefazione di D. Bensaïd, Edizioni Alegre, Roma 2006, pp. 73-88, 119-29; M. Azzzerri, *Rivoluzione e internazionalismo. Trotsky e i trotskismi tra ortodossia marxista e prefigurazione del futuro*, Aracne, Ariccia 2015, pp. 212-20.

<sup>58</sup> See G. Mastrolillo, *The Fourth International and Yugoslavia after the Tito-Stalin Split (1948-1951)*, in "Rivista storica del socialismo", V, 2020, 2, pp. 53-72.

<sup>59</sup> J. Pirjevec, *Tito e i suoi compagni*, Einaudi, Torino 2015, p. 257.

sostenitore e il simbolo di una deviazione del movimento, di un errore, bensì diveniva il rappresentate di una classe nemica, un agente del fascismo, un arnese dei servizi segreti stranieri, così passa pochissimo tempo, nel 1948, prima che si appiccichi la stessa etichetta al capo dei comunisti jugoslavi<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> P. Spriano, *I comunisti europei e Stalin*, Einaudi, Torino 1983, pp. 292-3.