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The Introduction to Part III of
"Leon Trotsky: Le Mouvement Communiste en France (1919 - 1939)
Documents Selected and Presented by
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The year 1924 marks in two senses a turn in the history of the Communist movement. On the one hand, the hopes which had been placed in a victory of the revolution in Germany, the "German October" awaited since 1918, collapsed lamentably. Everywhere the bourgeoisie resumed the offensive, while it became clear that the Social-Democracy had survived the war and the revolutionary crisis. On the other hand - though, of course, the two phenomena are closely linked - the 13th Conference of the Russian Communist Party, held in January 1924, a few days before the death of Lenin, sealed the defeat of Trotsky and of the Opposition which had been formed in 1923 on the question of the internal regime in the party and in favour of a democratic "new course". This was a victory for the new forces which emerged from the party apparatus, from the hierarchy of its secretaries and full-time officials, which expressed itself more and more openly through the mouth of Stalin, who had been General Secretary since 1922, over the Opposition, which the old Bolshevik spirit still animated.

In October 1924, the coalition of the victors, the "troika", Zinoviev-Kamenev-Stalin, opened up a virulent campaign against Trotsky on the occasion of the publication of his "Lessons of October". At the end of 1925, the "bloc" of the victors broke up and Stalin, supported by the right-wing fraction represented by Bukharin, crushed the "New Opposition" of his allies of yesterday, Zinoviev and Kamenev. He needed two years' sharp struggle to finish off the Unified Opposition in which Zinoviev and Kamenev joined Trotsky and the Opposition of 1923. The victory was won at the end of 1927, with Trotsky sent into exile at Alma-Ata. Almost immediately Stalin opened up the struggle against the right, the elimination of which was completed in 1929, the same year in which Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Union and found a precarious refuge on the isle of Prinkipo, in the sea off Constantinople.

These circumstances explain why Trotsky was kept practically without any contact with the problems of the Communist movement in France during the whole period of the struggle in Russia. It was only in exile that he could once again read the documents and study the French problems. From 1929 to 1933 he was to devote to them less time and, no doubt, less attention than to the German question, in his struggle for the "regeneration" of the politics of the International; this was the period of the rise of Hitler to power.

The victory of Stalin and Zinoviev in the Russian party in 1924 was to be a brutal interruption of the transformation of the French Communist Party, and was to divert it in a new direction, which no one - even Trotsky - had foreseen. In a few years, this social-democratic party of the old type was transformed into a party of a new type, a Stalinist party.

On the morrow of the defeat of the Russian Opposition, Souvarin, who inclined towards Trotsky's theses, proposed to the leading committee of the Communist Party a motion which was passed unanimously except for three votes against, to the effect

that the party must not slavishly follow the decisions of Moscow without having sufficient information. The prestige of Trotsky evidently was high in the French party and people like Rosmer and Monatte, less unpopular than Souvarin, were near to his ideas and principles. He was in a sense the godfather of the struggle to transform the French party into a real Communist party. The cadres spontaneously turned towards him. But Zinoviev, the patron of the international apparatus, did not want centres of opposition to be formed in the brother-parties, which might support the Russian Opposition. The Executive enjoyed the prestige which the October Revolution and the collective authority of the Bolshevik Party conferred on it. It controlled important material resources. These completely changed the conditions of militant activity of the French Communists, but of which it could deprive them if they seemed to be recalcitrant. The creation of a real apparatus was multiplying "full-time" functionaries, appointed thanks to the Executive and therefore deeply dependent on it. In April 1924, Marguerite Rosmer wrote to Humbert Droz, the representative of the International in Paris, that "functionaries are appearing on every side; for the most part they are incapable, without political sense, and they line up always on the strongest side so as not to lose their bit of cheese". On the pretext of "Bolshevisation" and of "re-organisation" Zinoviev's Executive took up a struggle against the "deviations" of those who sympathised with Trotsky and who were, for the event, labelled "rightists". Albert Treint and Suzanna Girault enjoyed his confidence and went to work roundly in the leading committee: this reversed its decisions and condemned the Russian Opposition. Rosmer, Monatte and Souvarin, who did not give up their opinions were accused of reflecting the influence of "social-democratic ideas" and "syndicalist prejudices". The supporters of Treint accused the "right-wingers" of resisting "Bolshevisation". Monatte replied to them that "The International has no need of courtiers".

Did the Oppositionists fully gauge the depth of the change which was taking place? We may well doubt it. Souvarin was the first to challenge openly the leadership of the Russian party and the International. His "Bulletin Communiste" published the current theses, with comments favourable to Trotsky, and then openly opposed Treint. He then opened a subscription for the publication in French of the brochure "The New Course", in which Trotsky put together the essential arguments of the Opposition. He received numerous contributions, including that of Maurice Thorez who at that time was the youthful secretary of the Pas-de-Calais federation. But he had gone forward too impetuously: he was quickly isolated in the Communist Party and removed from control of "Bulletin Communiste". After having delivered a real defence of Trotsky at the 13th Congress of the Russian party, he was excluded from the International by the 5th World Congress. In the interval the Executive had tightened its grip: young Maurice Thorez renounced his support for the Opposition, received his gold braid and became secretary of the organisation at the age of 25

At the national conference of the party in September, Monatte and Rosmer tried to open a fundamental discussion on the problem of the transformation of the party under the influence of the events in the Russian party. According to them, the essential problem which the next Congress had to resolve was that "under the label of 'Bolshevisation', people were intensifying methods today which were the most flagrant rejection of Bolshevism and Communism". They declared that the party was bureaucratized and militarized: "From the top of the party to the bottom there is a shower of slogans, which people obey without understanding them and especially without murmuring anything but the ritual 'Chief, you are right'. A mentality of cliqu-ism was being created and the morality of sergeants was taking over. So the bureaucracy of the party would out-do that of the French state." They were excluded from the party without even having been able to discuss, along with a third militant, the metal-worker, Delagarde. The two pioneers of the revolutionary struggle in France declared, in an open letter to the party members: "We think that it is Trotsky who, at the present moment, is really thinking and acting in the spirit of Lenin, and not those who pursue him with their attacks while wrapping themselves in the banner of Leninism".

Moreover the Bolshevizers did not even hide their real objectives any more. In Moscow Treint declared: "The slogan of Bolshevisation in France came out of the struggle against the right... against Trotskyist deviations". He declared: We must mercilessly eliminate these people as enemies of the proletariat and of the Russian Revolution". Maurice Thorez reported to the Organisation Conference of the International, also in Moscow: "The street cells hardly ever were a success. On the contrary, they were a centre for deviation. They therefore were closed down." Despite "Bolshevisation", the spirit of free discussion remained lively. With Monatte and Rosmer excluded, Fernand Loriot, another pioneer, took up the fight: he wrote that they must not "stifle all thought and prostrate themselves in front of a few dogmas... (must not) stifle every movement of ideas from below ... (must not) allow to be created a solidarity of egoistic material interests between Communist functionaries; for that reason, they ought to be elected by the members and not by the centre". He warned against the risk of a divorce between the party and the workers' vanguard: "The intelligent workers who come to us will quickly discover that the set-up of full-timers paralyses their active collaboration and reduces them to blind servitude. They will get tired and will leave the party." A new Opposition, of Loriot, the lawyer Maurice Paz and the metal-worker, Lemire, promoted several protests, including the celebrated "Letter of the 250", before it also found itself outside the party.

However, in Moscow, Stalin had just defeated Zinoviev. Throughout the International, Zinoviev's people were being persecuted in turn. In France, Treint and Suzanne Girault were demoted from the Political Bureau and all at once accused of being to blame for all the "excesses" of Bolshevisation. The new leaders were

more supple people, who had all given guarantees in the struggle against "Trotskyism", Marcel Cachin, of course, but also Jacques Doriot, Pierre Semard, and Gaston Monmousseau, who "betrayed" Monatte and brought "Vie Ouvriere" under the control of the Bolsheviseurs. Stalin himself watched the rise of certain young cadres, such as Jean Cremet, formerly a leader of the Young Communists, recruited by the Soviet secret service and proposed, for this reason, as a member of the Political Bureau. The new team did not appear to be very sound, so Manuilsky prepared to replace it, by selecting the leaders of the Communist Youth and of the CGTU. In 1929, Semard, who had been general secretary since 1923, was removed and replaced by a "collective" secretariat, formed of four "young ones": Henri Barbe, Pierre Celor, Maurice Thorez and Benoit Frachon. The failure of the new team was so blatant that some public explanation of it had to be given. In 1931, Thorez was to denounce what he called "the Barbe-Celor-Lozeray group", a leading nucleus which equally included Francois Billoux and Raymond Guyot, as if it had been a "fractional" group and not a leadership which only the authority of the Executive could have appointed and kept in place. He wrote a new version of the history of the party later, to his own glorification, and about 1930 gave the following description of the incident: "Arbitrary decisions at the top, a passive discipline demanded at all levels, stifling free discussion, suspicion, silence in default of agreement, closed mouths, no fruitful criticism and an atmosphere like a barracks." Here was a judgement which co-incided with that of people whom they excluded years before, but who, for all that, were not taken back. It was a state of affairs which endured. For Maurice Thorez denouncing "the group", the Barbe-Celor-Lozeray leadership denouncing the "right opportunists" Doriot and Semard, Doriot and Semard denouncing the "right opportunists" in 1924, are one and all only the mouth-pieces of the Stalinist leadership of the International in the role consisting of justifying the turns by throwing upon the preceding leadership of the Communist Party the blame for a policy which it had merely carried out.

During this period, Trotsky followed the French situation only from afar, absorbed as he was in the struggle of the Opposition on Russian and international questions which occupied the front of the stage of Communist history. In reality, the policy of the French Communist Party merely was wedded to the contours and zigzags of the history of the International after Lenin, in which Trotsky distinguishes three great periods. From 1924 to 1925 was the first period of "ultra-left errors", in which the Communist parties behaved as if they were everywhere in a revolutionary situation, at a time when bourgeois stabilisation and the retreat of the workers was obvious: in France the Communist Party went so far as to launch the slogan of creating a revolutionary tribunal and of turning the war in Morocco into a civil war. In 1926 - 27, after Zinoviev had been eliminated in Moscow, it was the second period, that of "avowed opportunism" under the shepherd's crook of Cachin, Doriot and Semard. The Central Committee went so far as to issue the

slogan, "Stop the Collective Importation of Foreign Labour", in the middle of the xenophobic campaign of the main newspapers against the immigrant workers and, in the senatorial elections in 1927, it made alliances with socialist republicans and radicals. In 1928 the "Third Period of the Errors of the Communist International" (the very title of a pamphlet by Trotsky) opened. The situation was declared to be "revolutionary" throughout the world, and especially in Europe. The masses were becoming "radicalised" every day. The socialists were baptised "social-fascists"; they became enemy no. 1, and the Communist parties, who rejected any contact with the "treacherous" leaders, prevented the formation of any united front with the reformist organisations. Immediately there were numerous adventures, presented as "revolutionary assaults by the proletariat": in reality, they were strikes or demonstrations conducted by handfuls of militants, which isolated the Communist vanguard and enabled the police to decimate its ranks. In France there really was stabilisation and the Communist Party experienced one loss after another. It mechanically applied the directives which it received, flinging itself into "conquering the streets", and in five years lost more than half of its active membership, having by 1929 no more than 35,000 members and a little over 20,000 in 1932, when it had over 120,000 after the Tours split. The print-run of "L'Humanite" fell below 100,000 copies. In the CGTU several minorities raised the banner of independence from the party. It was in a deep crisis and there were frequent exclusions of syndicalist militants. It was from France that Trotsky drew the necessary examples to demonstrate the catastrophic character of the "Third Period", as soon as he had sufficient information.

However, he could not be contented with an analysis. It was necessary in every Communist party to pursue the struggle against the "liquidationist" leadership, against the agents of Stalin, who were leading to disaster. It was the task of the Left Opposition to "regenerate" the International, and, especially in Germany, where the danger from Hitler was fed by an unprecedented economic and social crisis, to promote the United Front, by way of which lay any chance of working-class defence. Indeed, in France as elsewhere, there was not just one Opposition. The successive waves of excluded Oppositions did not result in the formation of a common front, in default of a unified opposition. Souvarine, who had resumed the publication of the "Bulletin Communiste" on his own account, started the "Marx-Lenin Communist Circle" in February 1926. Monatte, who had gone back to revolutionary syndicalism, and Rosmer, who remained faithful to Bolshevism, none the less founded jointly in 1925 "La Revolution Proletarienne", a "syndicalist-Communist review. They were surrounded by militant workers, often those who were the first Communists, and by revolutionary intellectuals like Marcel Martinet. They hoped to make their journal into a new "Vie Ouvriere". As for the 1926 Opposition, it expressed itself in the review "Contre le Courant", in which Fernand Loriot, Maurice Paz ^{and} /Lemire/ ^{wrote.} Treint and Suzanne Girault, with their friends in the "Zinoviev-

ist" Opposition, founded the "Leninist Union". A young Communist intellectual, come over from surrealism, Pierre Naville, revived "Clarte", which promptly reprinted the principal documents of the Russian Opposition, articles by Trotsky and by Victor Serge. In 1926, the Old Bolshevik Piatakov, one of the Russian leaders of the "Unified Opposition", who had been "exiled" on a mission to Paris, urged the Oppositionists to unite. He brought them together and said to them, in substance: "Regard the Russian Revolution as finished! Take up the torch again in the West!" After his visit, Contre le Courant, which had received financial help from the Russian Opposition, presented itself as the organ of the Unified Opposition in the Communist Party, but for all that there did not exist a unified opposition. Monatte and Rosmer, as well as Souvarin, refused to collaborate with those, like Treint who had excluded and slandered them. Lorient abandoned Bolshevism, returned to revolutionary syndicalism, was removed from the editorial board of Contre le Courant and found refuge in the group round "La Revolution Proletarienne". The "Leninist Unity" group split up. Suzanne Girault returned to Stalinist orthodoxy, but Treint moved towards the positions of Trotsky. Disorder reigned in 1928. Clarte became "La Lutte des Classes", the young enthusiasts behind it refusing any "bloc" with the former Zinovievists, and not wishing to follow the Russians to the point of their mistakes. The Opposition was a dis-united front; moreover, it could not reach agreement on a "line" in French questions.

As soon as he arrived on Prinkipo, Trotsky tried to renew his links and to unify the Opposition. But his problem was to do so in clarity. He thought that there was great confusion of ideas: "In this Opposition, which has some reason to call itself 'Left'", he wrote, "we were finding until very recently - and there are still at present - certain elements who came to join us in 1924, not because we presented ourselves as the defenders of an international revolutionary position, but because we were declared adversaries of Zinovievist adventurism. At this period there were many in France who, virtually opportunists, camouflaged themselves as Russian Oppositionists." He therefore proposed the bases for a minimum agreement to the groups which claimed to stand for the Opposition. The results were inconsistent: there was an immediate break with Souvarin, there was acknowledged disagreement with Monatte and a break with Maurice Paz. At the same time he managed to bring certain scattered elements together: Rosmer finally agreed to take this fight on and to distance himself from Monatte. ^{There came} Young elements recently excluded from the Communist Party or in the process of being; Raymond Molinier, Gourget, Pierre Frank and Gerard Rosenthal were at their head, the team which produced "La Lutte des Classes". One and all, they opposed bringing in Treint, who was for the time being to remain outside. On August 15, 1929, "La Verite" appeared, the weekly of the Left Opposition in France. Trotsky himself drafted its Declaration. The group of those who initiated it was small, but precious for the construction of the international organisation, of which Rosmer made himself the missionary. In

April 1930, a conference appointed an international secretariat of three members; Rosmer was one of them, and Pierre Naville was a substitute member. But the first steps were painful. In November 1930 Rosmer purely and simply retired. He disagreed with Trotsky about methods of work and the trade union question, and refused to go on working with Raymond Molinier, whom he regarded as "an illiterate, a manoeuvrer and a political adventurer", while Trotsky, impressed by the man's exceptional dynamism, was ready to make many concessions in order to "educate" and "discipline" him. Personal antagonism did not cease to grow between Molinier and Frank on the one hand, and Naville and Gourget on the other. It was to be poisoned by the dispute about the trade unions. Monatte launched his committee for trade union re-unification. It was a painful moment when Trotsky broke with him, accusing him of having "crossed the Rubicon". At the same moment as he disclosed the signs of a new upward movement of the working class, he none the less wrote: "So much the worse for Monatte! So much the better for the Revolution!"

The essential thing, none the less, remained to be done. The need was to regenerate the Communist party, the sole instrument possible for the victory of the revolution and, to this end, to form a solid fraction of the Left Opposition, which was organised in April 1930 under the name of Communist League. The adventurist stupidities of the Communist Party alarmed many of the militants, especially in the CGTU: a field of activity was opening up before the League and progress was made.

The "Unitary Opposition" was formed in April 1930 as a result of talks between Rosmer and Dommanget. Its nucleus was the unitary federation of teachers, led by militants excluded from the Communist Party, such as Maurice Dommanget, Aulas, Gilbert Serret and the veteran Communist, Louis Bouet. It grew and made a serious implantation in several regional unions of the CGTU in the North, round worker-militants of the League, miners, textile workers or metal-workers, in the East with the iron miners, with Paget, the engineers behind the militant, J.C. Florence, in the Tours region round a former member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party, Alfred Bernard. With the friends of Dommanget, it was the people of the League, Michel Collinet, Bernard and especially Gourget, who inspired the Unitary Opposition. They believed that they had succeeded in this way in laying the foundations for a "broad current", necessary to reach the general mass of the workers, whom the general theses of the left could never quickly influence. But the Unitary Opposition became the stake in a fractional struggle within the League. A group of Parisian members, following Molinier and Frank, took the leadership - by methods which their opponents contested - and undertook to "reform" the "trade union work", which, according to them, was being led in an "opportunist" fashion. Trotsky supported the Frank-Molinier group with all his authority, calling them "the Marxist wing". Though these Parisian militants had no trade union experience and the Unitary Opposition did not exist in Paris, Trotsky judged that the criterion must be the problem of the party and the fraction: this was the basis on

which Frank and Molinier took their stand, while their opponents made, according to Trotsky, too many concessions to their allies in the Unitary teachers' federation, themselves being reserved about the League and in no hurry to anathematise Monatte, even if they did not follow him, in brief, more "syndicalist" than party people, who, furthermore, did not believe the "regeneration of the Communist Party to be possible. The "Marxist wing", which Trotsky supported, won the day, but the result was deplorable; the Unitary Opposition did not survive, many sympathisers of the League moved away from it, people became suspicious of it and its militants departed, with Gourget and Collinet, one of whom would soon be with the Communist Party and the other in the Left of the SFIO, after having tried to activate a rival "League", the "Communist Left".

The militants of the League were again reduced in numbers, having lost the most prestigious of their members, and had soon to stand up to the violence which from then on the bureaucrats of the Communist Party employed against them, in default of arguments.

Did the authentic Communist Party, the instrument of the revolution, which ten years before Monatte had agreed with Trotsky to try to form, still exist? Could it be regenerated? Had the French group of "Bolshevik-Leninists" the strength to provoke this regeneration? There were so many questions raised, which Trotsky could not solve. For the moment, it was the class struggle in Germany which engrossed his whole attention, and to which he devoted the essential part of his writing until 1933, the decisive ^{date} of the victory of Hitler and of the collapse without a struggle of the German workers' movement.