

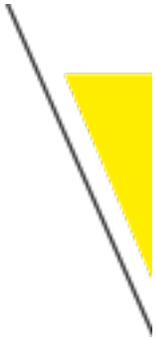
# Beyond anti-anti-Communism

Does it matter what socialists think about Trotsky today?

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by [David Camfield](#)

**David Camfield** writes that on the 80th anniversary of Leon Trotsky's assassination, even as we move further from the conditions that defined the Trotskyist movement of last century, a critical appreciation of his politics remains necessary for the emerging socialist Left.



August 21, 2020 is the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Leon Trotsky's assassination by an agent of the USSR, then led by dictator Joseph Stalin. Does it matter what socialists today think about this Russian revolutionary socialist?

Many socialists, especially people new to socialist politics, don't have a definite opinion. Some of us who're busy campaigning around policing, housing, income support, school reopening or other urgent fronts of struggle may be inclined to think that Trotsky is basically irrelevant.



Trotsky in Mexico in 1940.

That stance is understandable. Trotsky *is* less important for us than he is for most of the people passionately arguing about him today. But, like it or not, Trotsky—like other long-dead socialist figures—matters to the extent that the politics of the debates in which he was an important voice affect what we do today and in the future. Some of the debates with which Trotsky is most associated *are* still relevant for the left. Moreover, historical ignorance is never a virtue.

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In 2020 it is still necessary to challenge Stalinist ([tankie](#)) slanders and misrepresentations of Trotsky. In societies like the US and Canada today, and to a lesser extent the UK, knowledge of history has receded and socialist traditions are weak. This affects today's welcome growing interest in socialism. Unfortunately, there are a minority of people who've come to socialist politics in recent years who have more or less positive views of the USSR during the years when Stalin was its key ruler, and of the politics imposed by its rulers on the international Communist movement during that time. Simplistic "anti-anti-communism"—just putting a plus sign where ideologues of Western capitalism put a minus—is profoundly mistaken (as it was when it was embraced by many radicals in the West in the 1960s and 1970s).



Soviet tanks push their way through a student demonstration in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1968.

At the very least, failing to grasp that [Stalin's political influence was counter-revolutionary](#) in the Soviet Union and internationally from 1923 until his death three decades later is a serious mistake. Not recognizing that can lead those new to socialism to adopt deeply flawed politics inherited (whether they know it or not) from the Communist movement in Stalin's day. It's these politics that are at stake in Stalinist Trotsky-bashing, whether contemporary-lite or vintage-ferocious. There are also some basic matters of truth about what the USSR, China, and other so-called "socialist" societies were or are like. Above all, the attitude of socialists today to Stalinist politics in its various strands (those of groups formerly aligned with the USSR or Maoist China) affects the future of the left.

More common now than Stalinist Trotsky-bashing is the rejection of Trotsky because of his intransigently revolutionary politics. This is the Trotsky-related argument most worth having, since most socialists don't buy tankie Trotsky-bashing. Today's believers in democratic socialism as a project of reforms—sometimes paradoxically qualified as "non-reformist"—to be achieved by electing socialists to government office and by backing them up with the muscle of vigorous unions and social movements, have reason to see Trotsky's politics as qualitatively different from theirs. These socialists may appreciate some of Trotsky's contributions, such as his argument for a united front against fascism and his opposition to the idea that a dictatorship that unleashed repression and mass murder against the working class and peasantry was genuinely socialist. But they're right to see that Trotsky's insistence that the capitalist state could not be taken over and used by socialists, to gradually go beyond capitalism, places his politics at a considerable distance from theirs. It's well worth debating with comrades whose criticism of Trotsky hinges on his commitment to [the revolutionary dismantling of the existing state](#) and its replacement with new and much more democratic institutions.

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And then there's the unquestioning Trotskyist reverence for "the old man." Many Trotskyists will use the occasion of the anniversary of his death to celebrate Trotsky's contributions and reiterate not just that their politics are better than social democracy and Stalinism, but that they are already fully equivalent to the kind of socialism we need today.

The Ukrainian Marxist Roman Rosdolsky once wrote "There are two ways to look at Marx and Engels: as the creators of a brilliant, but in its deepest essence, thoroughly critical, scientific method; or as church fathers of some sort, the bronzed figures of a monument." Much too often Trotskyists look at Trotsky as a lesser church father, a slightly smaller figure beside the statues of the founding fathers at the shrine. Trotskyism's origins—as an embattled, minority current whose leaders saw themselves as defenders of the politics of the Communist International in its early years against Stalinism—made its supporters more inclined to champion inherited ideas than to develop socialist politics using a critical Marxist method. "Those who cannot defend old positions will never conquer new ones," Trotsky famously wrote. But were the old positions entirely correct at the time? And what if we're now on a different battlefield?

Trotsky ought to be defended against most of his detractors, but not uncritically. As a historical figure, Trotsky deserves a "thoroughly critical" political assessment.<sup>1</sup> More important, the socialism we need today needs to [go beyond Trotskyism](#). The anniversary of Trotsky's death should not be an occasion for bolstering a tradition that ought to be both critically appreciated and superseded by socialists today

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1. Two contributions to such an assessment are John Molyneux's *Leon Trotsky's Theory of Revolution* (1981), written before the author made his peace with a version of Trotskyist orthodoxy, and John Marot's "Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Rise of Stalinism: Theory and Practice," a 2005 journal article republished in his *The October Revolution in Prospect and Retrospect* (2012).