

# “Thirst for Power”

*A short chapter written for a book.  
January 3, 1937.*

by  
**Leon Trotsky**

Basic Translation by A.L. Preston (1970).

Corrected in accord with the Russian original  
published in the book *Prestupleniia Stalina*.

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# Introduction

This pamphlet, “Thirst for Power,” was originally one of 26 small component chapters of one of Leon Trotsky’s most interesting books, *Prestupleniia Stalina* [*The Crimes of Stalin*]. This little-known work was written on board the ship which carried Trotsky and his wife from *de facto* house arrest in Norway to political asylum in Mexico late in December of 1936. Along with commentary about his troubled personal situation, Trotsky’s book addressed various aspects of the first of the “Great Purge Trials” held in Moscow that August and marked a first formal response to the charges against him emerging from that proceeding.<sup>1</sup>

Although grand plans were announced in *Biulleten’ oppositsii*, the central journal of the Trotskyists, for *Prestupleniia Stalina* to appear “in a short time. . . in all the European languages,” the rapid pace of events in the USSR and the strategic decision of Trotsky to organize a “counter-trial” seems to have rendered this project impractical. Only two versions of the book saw print in Trotsky’s lifetime: a French edition which appeared in Paris in 1937 and a Spanish edition released in Santiago, Chile in 1938. While an Italian edition was released in 1966, it was not until the 1970 first edition of *Writings of Leon Trotsky* that the material was finally translated into English, the language of the largest national segment of the Trotskyist movement. The book still has never appeared under separate covers in the English language. The Russian original, based on the manuscript held at Harvard Library, was finally published in Moscow in an edition of 5,000 copies early in 1994.<sup>2</sup>

“Thirst for Power” (the title is encircled by ironic quotation marks in the original) is Trotsky’s brief answer to Soviet Prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky’s assessment that “. . . power, power at all costs, thirst for personal power—this is the whole ideology of the gang that is now in the dock.”<sup>3</sup> Trotsky’s reply to this charge is succinct and emphatic: “The revolutionary who does not aspire to put the state’s apparatus of repression in

the service of his program is worthless.” Thus, “the struggle for power is not an end in itself, but corresponds to the whole revolutionary activity. . .”

The primary importance of this document to the specialist historian lies in the account Trotsky provides here of the initial contact between the newly-emerged Zinovievist “New Opposition” faction (based around the Leningrad Party organization) and the already well-established underground Trotsky faction. According to Trotsky, volition for the combination of these former foes into a “United Opposition” against the Stalin faction came via Zinoviev’s right-hand man, Lev Kamenev, who held a face-to-face discussion with Trotsky early in 1926. Reading between the lines, Trotsky felt that the Zinoviev group sought to make use of him [Trotsky] as a means of validating Zinoviev’s claim on the leadership of the Party. Trotsky claims here that he already understood the stability of the Stalin-Bukharin group at the helm of the Party through the proverbial school of hard knocks, the unequal and one-sided factional struggle of 1923-26. Deposing the leadership was no simple thing, in his mind. Trotsky claims to have not shared the Zinoviev group’s predilection towards open struggle within the Party. Nevertheless, this orientation ultimately did not preclude joint action, culminating in the debacle of the street demonstrations of November 7, 1927, and the subsequent expulsions of Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and scores of others from the Party.

Although a verbatim transcript of the August 1936 Zinoviev/Kamenev trial has yet to be published, the Secret Police’s take on the “Zinoviev-Trotsky Alliance” may be summarized from the heavily edited transcript published by the People’s Commissariat of Justice in 1936 as follows: From the fall of 1931, helpless in its political isolation, the underground Trotskyist organization moved towards the tactic of individual terrorism against leaders of the Stalin faction. This change of line from political struggle to personal terrorism is said to have been delivered verbally by Trotsky’s son, Lev Sedov, to Ivan Smirnov in Berlin. The instructions were then personally relayed back to Russia by Smirnov. In the middle of 1932, a decision was made on the ground in Russia to unite the weak underground Trotskyist and Zinovievist organizations in order to increase the underground’s combined strength, a decision which was confirmed by Trotsky in a letter back to Russia that fall. A secret “United Center” combining key members of the Trotskyist and Zinovievist undergrounds was organized in the summer of 1932, meeting at Kamenev and Zinoviev’s dacha at Ilinskoe in accordance with this strategy. Discussion about the need for terrorist action was begun. Preparations were said to have been

disrupted from late 1932 through the middle of 1933 by Zinoviev and Kamenev's implication in the "Riutin Case,"<sup>4</sup> which necessitated a go-slow approach. In the summer of 1934, a secret conference was held at Kamenev's Moscow apartment at which Leningrad and Moscow terrorist cells were formed and the decision was made to "expedite the assassination of S.M. Kirov." Leningrad terrorist groups were put on the case shadowing Kirov as they "waited for an opportune moment to commit their terroristic act." Zinoviev and Kamenev are said to have transmitted the instruction to the assassin Leonid Nikolaev to shoot Kirov via verbal directions delivered by Ivan Bakaev, also a defendant at the trial. Trotsky is said to have communicated further written instructions (by means of invisible ink in a German cinema magazine) in October 1934 to "accelerate the assassination of Stalin and Voroshilov." The terrorist conspiracy is said to have managed to kill Kirov but not Stalin, Voroshilov, or any other ranking member of the Soviet elite. The group continued to function "up to 1936," according to Zinoviev's testimony at the trial.<sup>5</sup>

Trotsky's statement in this article that after 1927 he and Zinoviev and Kamenev "were never again to exchange one single letter, not one single message, either directly or indirectly" is thus an explicit denial of the connections alleged by Vyshinsky in the 1936 Zinoviev Trial.

All this begs the question: To what extent did Stalin and the Party leadership or the NKVD themselves *believe* the testimony squeezed out of the defendants in the pre-trial inquisition leading up to the Zinoviev Trial? Certainly, coercion was employed and fabrication practiced by Secret Police investigators in the Zinoviev Trial of 1936—just as it was in previous high-profile judicial actions (including the trials of the Socialist Revolutionaries [1922], the Shakhty *spetsy* [1928], the Food Supply "Wreckers" [1930], the Working Peasant Party [1930], *Prompartiiia* [1930], the Mensheviks [1931], and the Metro-Vickers *spetsy* [1933], to name but a few such cases). But the mere fact that coercion was employed and fabrication practiced in the course of the pre-trial investigation does not necessarily imply that Stalin and his associates—or even the Secret Police themselves!—rejected the charges *in toto*. Indeed, I would argue that in this case, as with the other aforementioned judicial proceedings, the Party elite, the Secret Police apparatus, and the Soviet citizen in the street generally *believed* in the veracity of the charges, while not necessarily accepting every specific detail.

But that's a matter for another day...

—Tim Davenport

# **“Thirst For Power”**

*by Leon Trotsky*

In the words of Vyshinsky (August 1936), the “United Center” had no program whatsoever. It was motivated only by “the naked thirst for power.” Of course, I had this “thirst” more than others. The theme of my love of power has been expounded upon by the people on the payroll of the Communist International and some bourgeois journalists on more than one occasion. In the impatient desire to seize control of the state these gentlemen sought the key to my unexpected affairs as a terrorist. This explanation—the “thirst for power”—fits rather well into the narrow head of the average philistine.

When, at the beginning of 1926, the “New Opposition” (Zinoviev, Kamenev, and others) engaged in conversations with me and my friends on common action, Kamenev said to me during the first meeting we had together eye to eye:

“The bloc can be realized, it goes without saying, only if you intend to struggle for power. We have discussed among ourselves several times the following question: is it possible that Trotsky has become tired and decided to limit himself from now on to literary criticism, that he has departed the path of struggle for power?”

In those days, Zinoviev, the great agitator, and Kamenev, the “intelligent politician” as Lenin called him, were still completely under the illusion that it would be easy for them to win back the power. “As soon as you appear on the platform hand in hand with Zinoviev,” Kamenev said to me, “the party will declare, ‘There is the Central Committee! There is

the government!’ The only question is whether you are prepared to form a government.”

After three years of oppositional struggle (1923-26), I in no way shared these optimistic hopes. Our group (“the Trotskyists”) at that time had already worked up a rather clear idea of the second, Thermidorian phase of the revolution and of the growing discord between the bureaucracy and the people, of the nationalist degeneration of the leading stratum, and of the profound repercussions the defeats the world proletariat had on the fate of the USSR. The question of power did not stand independently for me, outside of important internal and international processes. The role of the Opposition in the forthcoming period would be of a preparatory character. It was necessary to cultivate new cadres and to await further developments.

In this regard, I answered Kamenev:

“I feel in no way ‘tired,’ but my opinion is that we should arm ourselves with patience for rather a long time, for a whole historical period. Today, it is not a matter of fighting for power, but rather of preparing the ideological instruments and the organizational methods of the fight, while waiting for a fresh revolutionary upsurge. When this will come, I don’t know.”

Readers of my autobiography, my *History of the Russian Revolution*, *The Third International After Lenin*, or *The Revolution Betrayed* will find nothing there about this dialogue with Kamenev. I mention it here now only because it throws sufficient light on the stupidity and absurdity of the “idea” ascribed to me by the Moscow falsifiers: that I aimed by means of a handful of revolver-wielding revolutionaries to return the revolution to its starting point of October 1917.

Eighteen months of fighting inside the party dealt with the illusions of Zinoviev and Kamenev about the rapid return to power as they deserved. But they drew a conclusion from this experience diametrically opposed to mine. “If it is not possible to seize power from the leading

group,” said Kamenev, “there is but one thing to do: to return to the common team of horses.” After some hesitation, Zinoviev came to the same conclusion.

On the eve or, perhaps, even at the actual time of the Fifteenth Congress, which excluded the Opposition, in December 1927, I had my final conversation with Zinoviev and Kamenev. Each of us had to settle our destinies for many years to come, perhaps for the rest of our lives. At the end of the session, which had unfolded in restrained terms, in a really profoundly “pathetic” tone Zinoviev said to me, “Vladimir Ilich (Lenin) warned us in his testament that relations between Trotsky and Stalin might split the party. Think of the responsibility you bear! Is our platform correct or not? Now it is more correct than it ever was!” (After but a few days they were to publicly disavow the platform).

“If that is so,” I said, “the very fierceness of the fight of the apparatus against us testifies that these are not temporary disagreements but social contradictions. Lenin also wrote in his testament that if the divergence of views inside the party coincided with class differences, nothing would save us from a split—least of all capitulation!”

I remember that after a further exchange, I came back again to the testament in which Lenin had recalled that Zinoviev and Kamenev had recoiled from the insurrection in 1917 for reasons which are “not accidental.”

“The present moment is similar and yet you are preparing to commit the same sort of mistake, which may be the greatest mistake of your lives!”

That was our last conversation. We were never again to exchange one single letter, not one single message, after that, either directly or indirectly. In the ten years that followed I never ceased to castigate the capitulation of Zinoviev and Kamenev, which, while a terrible blow to the Opposition, was to have for Zinoviev and Kamenev themselves infinitely more serious consequences than I could have foreseen at the end of 1927.

On May 26, 1928, I wrote from Alma Ata (Central Asia) to my friends:

“The Party will need us again, more than ever. Not to become impatient by telling ourselves that ‘everything will be done without us,’ not to torment oneself and others unnecessarily; to study, to wait, to be vigilant, and *not to allow our political line to be corroded by the rust of personal irritation* with the slanderers and curs—such must be our attitude.”

It is no exaggeration to say that the thoughts expressed in these lines constitute the essential motif of my political affairs. From my youth, I learned in the school of Marxism a contempt for superficial subjectivism, which finds virtue in prodding history with a pin. I have always seen in mistaken revolutionary impatience the source of opportunism and adventurism. I have written hundreds of articles against those who “present bills to history before they are due” (May 1909).

In March 1931, I quoted with approval the words of my late co-thinker, Kote Tsintsadze,<sup>6</sup> who died in exile: “Unhappy are they who cannot wait!”

I reject the charge of impatience, as well as many other charges. I can wait. Indeed, what does the word “wait” mean in the present case? Prepare for the future! Does not all revolutionary activity come down to this?

For the proletarian party, power is the means of social transformation. The revolutionary who does not aspire to put the state’s apparatus of repression in the service of his program is worthless. In this connection, the struggle for power is not an end in itself, but corresponds to the whole revolutionary activity—the education and gathering together of the toiling masses. The conquest of power, quite naturally flowing from this activity and in its turn having to serve it, can bring personal satisfaction. But one would have to be quite exceptionally stupid and vulgar to aspire to power for its own sake. The only people who are capable of that are those who are unfit for anything better.

## Notes

1. “The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center” was held August 19-24 in Moscow and included G.E. Zinoviev, L.B. Kamenev, G.E. Evdomimov, I.N. Smirnov, and 12 others in the dock.

2. *Les Crimes De Staline* (Paris: Grasset, 1937); *Los Crimenes de Stalin* (Santiago: Zig-Zag, 1938); *I Cimini di Stalin* (Roma: Casini, 1966); *Writings of Leon Trotsky* First Edition: 1937-38, Second Edition: 1936-37 and 1937-38 (New York: Pathfinder Press); *Prestupleniia Stalina* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Gumanitarnoi Literatury, 1994).

3. *Report of Court Proceedings: The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre, Heard Before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, Moscow, April 19-24, 1936.* (Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice of the USSR, 1936), pg. 124.

4. **The Riutin Case—**

5. *Report of Court Proceedings: The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre..., passim.*

6. **Kote Tsintsadze** (1887-1930). Long-time member of the Georgian Bolshevik Party, with *partstazh* dating back to 1903. During the 1905 Revolution, the 18-year old Tsinstadze was an associate of the legendary brigand Kamo, serving as a leader of a Bolshevik “fighting detachment” which conducted armed “expropriations” on behalf of the Party. Tsintsadze was later the head of the Transcaucasian Cheka in the post-Revolutionary period. From 1923, Tsintsadze was a leading Georgian adherent of the Trotsky faction. He was expelled from the VKP(b) for his factional activity in 1927, was exiled in 1928, and died of ill health in the harsh conditions of exile in 1930. Tsintsadze's memoirs were serialized in a Georgian periodical in 1923-24, but a translation to English has never subsequently been made. At the time of his death, Leon Trotsky commemorated this “*praktik* and organizer” in the following terms: “A good natured sarcasm and a sly sense of humor were combined in this tempered terrorist with a gentleness one might almost call feminine.” (*Portraits: Personal and Political*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976), pg. 95)