

Did Stalin "steal" Trotsky's economic program?

InDefenseOfToucans

July 2020

1 Introduction

There seems to be a persistent myth that Stalin took the programme of Trotsky and the Left Opposition when he made his break with the NEP in the late 20s. This incorrect history is very common it is even in George Orwells Animal Farm, which given in at least most American schools it is required reading might be where people get the idea. You may remember it is the bit where the Stalin pig pisses on the plans for the windmill, then ends up using them later and there is even a line about the Stalin pig had his propganda pig guy announce he was the one who was for it all along. This is supposed to represent the economic debates, but it is wrong. Turns out this history is a bit more complicated then can be explained with a windmill and pig piss.

2 The Myth

But this idea is not limited to an allegorical novella taught in high schools as anti-communist propaganda. This actually became a pretty prominent interpretation of events amongst western academic histories. Stephan F. Cohen points this out in Bolshevism and Stalinism an Essay in Robert C. Tucker's Stalinism Essays in Historical Interpretation.

"The programmatic debates of the 1920's are treated largely as an extension of, and in terms of, the Trotsky-Stalin rivalry (or, perpetuating the factional misnomers of the period, "permanent revolution" and "socialism in one country"). Trotsky and the Left opposition are said to have been anti-NEP and embronically Stalinist, the progenitors of "almost every major item in the political program that Stalin later carried out." Stalin is then said to have stolen, or adapted, Trotsky's economic policies in 1929. Having portrayed a "basic affinity between Trotsky's plan and Stalin's actions," these secondary interpretations suggest at least a significant continuity between Stalinism and Bolshevik thinking in the 1920's, and underlie the general interpretation of NEP. They are, however, factually incorrect"¹

This is the pretty common view on the left, like seriously look up Trotsky and NEP, and you can find people arguing about it on Twitter. Don't want to spend a ton of time on this, but the left seems so reliant on like 70 year old historiography on the Soviet Union and constantly repeat these older ideas. It also touches on the fact the debates of the 1920s weren't Permanent Revolution

¹R.C. Tucker and W. Brus. *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*. Norton, 1977. ISBN: 9780393008920, p. 21.

vs Socialism in One country, that is a really bad inaccurate oversimplification, which I am not going to get in fully here, but you should see a bit of why it is wrong by the end of this.

3 Trotsky Originator of the NEP?

So why exactly is this theory wrong? Well Stalin's ending of the NEP could not be taken from Trotsky as Trotsky was a proponent of the NEP and even was one of the first to propose it. We can see Trotsky states in *My Life and The New course* that in February of 1920 that he proposed very similar policies to which would become the NEP. But just because Trotsky said this in his sort of memoirs and an article from 1923 does not mean we can trust it. Now I don't have the full transcript of the 10 congress, but we can see from two historians that Trotsky at this congress made a point of mentioning that he did propose this and no one challenged that or said it was wrong.

From Moshe Lewin's *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates*

"Trotsky, who adopted wholeheartedly the NEP at its inception"

Then from a note at the bottom of the page

"Trotsky could afford to endorse the NEP wholeheartedly because he too had some previous positions to call back on. He was, in fact, the first to have advocated NEP-like changes as early as February 1920, but his proposals were then rejected by the Central committee. Trotsky then turned to his plan of statization of the trade unions, but this too was rejected by Lenin, who was soon to adopt the NEP (on this both leaders agreed)."²

and from E.H Carr's Volume 2 of his *A History of Soviet Russia*.

"In February 1920, before the ninth party congress, at a moment when the civil war already seemed over, Trotsky had proposed in the Politburo to replace requisitioning of surpluses by a tax in kind calculated on a percentage of production, and to put the exchange of goods with the peasantry on an individual rather than a collective basis. But he had been opposed by Lenin, and obtained only 4 of the 15 votes."³

Now with the opening of the archives we did find it Trotsky was not the first person to bring up a replacement of grain requisitions with a tax and permit a certain level of trade. Around the same time but unknown to Trotsky, Yuri Larin just a week or two prior proposed something similar which was supported by Rykov, but was opposed by Lenin. Now none of this was a new idea, before the civil war broke out there was talk of taxation and trade with the peasantry, but this never really took effect.⁴

Of course too we don't even really have to trust Trotsky or Historians that Trotsky supported the NEP essentially out of the gate. In Lenin's *To the Russian Colony in North America*, Lenin says to anyone questioning the NEP "I would refer to the speeches of Comrade Trotsky and my own speech at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International" Trotsky's speech in question

²M. Lewin, N.I. Bukharin, and Princeton University. *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates: from Bukharin to the Modern Reformers*. Princeton University Press, 1974. ISBN: 9780691052182, p. 93.

³E.H. Carr. *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*. A history of Soviet Russia v. 1. Macmillan, 1978. ISBN: 9780333242162, p. 280.

⁴A. Nove. *An Economic History of the USSR, 1917-1991*. A Penguin Book. Penguin Books, 1992. ISBN: 9780140157741, p. 69.

was delivered at Session 10, on Tuesday the 14th of November of 1922 at 6:15 pm, a summary can be found on Marxists.org under the title "The Economic Situation of Soviet Russia from the Standpoint of the Socialist Revolution" and Lenin's is Session 8 on Monday 13th of November of 1922 at 11:40 am. This speech was Lenin's first public one following a stroke in May 1922, it is rather short compared to Trotsky's on the question. So we have Lenin saying that Trotsky's speech was a defense of the NEP and refereed people to it.

But you might say "well Trotsky initially was for it, but him and the Left Opposition became opponents of it after Lenin's death", but this simply is not true either.

4 Trotsky, The Left Opposition and the NEP

Pulling from Cohen's article again

"Trotsky's actual economic proposals in the 1920s were based on the NEP and its continuation. He urged greater attention to heavy industry and planning earlier than did Bukharin, and he worried more about the village "kulak"; but his remedies were moderate, market-orientated, or, as the expression went, "nepist." Like Bukharin, he was a "reformist" in economic policy, looking towards the evolution of NEP Russia towards industrialism and socialism."⁵

Now two quotes from Moshe Lewin's Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates

"They envisaged the continuation of the NEP and therefore logically enough, stated that although they intended to exercise greater control over the kulaks and private entrepreneurs, to tax them more efficient, and to promote more collectivization in the countryside, the liquidation of the kulaks and of private sectors, or a large-scale administrative drive against peasants, was also out of the question."⁶

"In propaganda texts, the majority's spokesmen accused the Left of planning to liquidate the NEP, to oppress the peasantry, to raise prices and lower the standard of living, and other sins. But the latter, no doubt sincerely, reasserted that it favored the NEP, did not intend to expropriate the property of the kulaks, nor indeed, that of any other private entrepreneurs, and that it, in fact even, welcomed some growth of these elements provided the growth of the socialist sector, mainly industrial, was constantly assured. They opposed using the G.P.U. against the private sectors."⁷

In terms of economic thinking the Left Argued for development of the industrial sector and that collectivization had to follow the development of the industrial sector, and that this should be done with the peasants consent, and that even the agricultural industry could grow so as long as industry was growing faster and could keep up to supply them with goods to keep the relationship good.⁸

So we can see the idea that Trotsky rejected the NEP is false. I also see ideas that Trotsky was against development of the Soviet Economy, when it is really

⁵Tucker and Brus, *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, op. cit.

⁶Lewin, Bukharin, and University, *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates: from Bukharin to the Modern Reformers*, op. cit., p. 16.

⁷Ibid., p. 35.

⁸Ibid., p. 36.

the opposite, Trotsky represented the faction calling for industrialization and focus on economic development. This is in opposition to Bukharin's position of industrialization at a snails pace.

5 Stalin's economic position before collectivization

Another thing that is not often enough pointed out, Stalin was not the leading figure opposed to Trotsky on economic matters, that was Bukharin. Quoting from Bukharin

"Stalin's public policies on industry, agriculture and planning were Bukharin's, that is, pro-NEP, moderate, evolutionary. This was the cement of the Stalin-Bukharin duumvirate that made official policy and led the party majority against the Left opportunists until early 1928."⁹

Though in private Stalin would often show more of a disagreement with Bukharin, "In June of the same year, he firmly declared behind the scenes that Bukharin's slogan 'enrich yourselves', which he had addressed to 'all the peasants', was 'not our slogan' and 'incorrect'"¹⁰

6 End of the NEP

When Stalin ended the NEP he was not "stealing" anyone economic plans, not his former ally Bukharin, nor his opponent Trotsky. Stalin created his new policy regardless of if you think it was justified or not it was a break from previous Bolshevik thinking. From Cohen again "Stalin's new policies of 1929-33, the "great change," were a radical departure from Bolshevik programmatic thinking. No Bolshevik leader or faction had ever advocated anything akin to imposed collectivization, the "liquidation" of the kulaks, breakneck heavy industrialization"¹¹

7 Conclusion

Now I really could have just used Cohen's whole essay because he essentially makes the same argument, but given it is from one guy would make it easier for some people to dismiss. Plus I think the quotes from Lenin aid this, something else I want to mention. But a sort of appeal not to trust memoirs I think this is maybe another major source of this myth. Harry Haywood actually says Trotsky attacked the NEP from the start in his memoirs, when this is just really flat out wrong and I think it is fine and even good to read books like this, but they shouldn't be your only source on things. In this video I didn't take Trotsky at his word in recalling the history I went and verified that claim with more than one historian.

Hope you enjoyed this video and it helps you understand some of the positions of the figures in the 1920s Soviet Economic Debates, I have a much longer

⁹Tucker and Brus, *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

¹⁰S. Davies and J. Harris. *Stalin: A New History*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. ISBN: 9781139446631, p. 122.

¹¹Tucker and Brus, *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 24.

video showing Bukharin's positions during this period coming some time soon. Hopefully after my next video I will be done with my break from longer videos and I will release some longer big history videos that I have been working on this year.

References

- Carr, E.H. *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*. A history of Soviet Russia v. 1. Macmillan, 1978. ISBN: 9780333242162.
- Davies, S. and J. Harris. *Stalin: A New History*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. ISBN: 9781139446631.
- Lewin, M., N.I. Bukharin, and Princeton University. *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates: from Bukharin to the Modern Reformers*. Princeton University Press, 1974. ISBN: 9780691052182.
- Nove, A. *An Economic History of the USSR, 1917-1991*. A Penguin Book. Penguin Books, 1992. ISBN: 9780140157741.
- Tucker, R.C. and W. Brus. *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*. Norton, 1977. ISBN: 9780393008920.