

TROTSKYISTS, DECISTS AND THE SOVIET THERMIDOR

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We will compare three texts that express the debates between Trotskyists and Decists after the XV Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (AUCP), held between December 2 and 19, 1927. The texts are:

I. “At a new stage”, written by Leon Trotsky in December 1927 (perhaps already at the beginning of 1928);

II. “Old Mistakes at a New Stage”, a Decist document with no information on authorship, from early 1928;

III. “On Thermidor and Centrism”, a document with no information on authorship, distributed by the Decist-Sapronovist center of Moscow in August 1928.

As is known, the XV Congress sealed the expulsion of the Opposition from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a process that had already been taking shape in the months preceding the congress. A few weeks after the congress, the deportations of oppositionists to various isolated regions of Soviet territory began.

The Congress also became known as a milestone in the deliberation of the process of collectivization of the countryside and accelerated industrialization (which only began in October, 1928). In a certain sense, this approved (albeit in a distorted way) part of the program of the Left Opposition. The texts we will examine address how the oppositionists historically assessed the expulsion of the Opposition (along with the debate it entailed regarding Thermidor and Bonapartism) and how they evaluated the “leftward” policy of Stalin’s group.

The debate on Thermidor began well before the Congress. In 1926, the Decist-Sapronovist group already claimed that Thermidor was an accomplished fact, which was not supported by the Trotskyist opposition group.

I. “At a new stage”

Leon Trotsky

According to *The Challenge of Left Opposition* (Pathfinder, 1980, p. 627), this text was “probably written shortly after it [the XVth Congress, 1927] ended, after the capitulations [of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Piatakov and others] and expulsions but before the deportations began.”

The dilemma posed by Bukharin

The text begins by presenting an attack by Bukharin on the Opposition in the debates that preceded the congress – he said that either there existed a dictatorship of the proletariat in the USSR or there existed Thermidor. There could be no middle ground. The Opposition had to decide. Trotsky, however – as Zinoviev had done before him – seeks a middle ground in the analysis. Asking whether the degeneration of the dictatorship had turned into Thermidor – he argues:

“An individual worker may come to the conclusion from his daily experiences that power is no longer in the hands of the working class: in the factory the ‘triangle’ reigns supreme; criticism has been banned; in the party the apparatus is all-powerful; behind the backs of the soviet organizations high-ranking bureaucrats give all the orders; and so on. But it is sufficient to look at the question from the viewpoint of the bourgeois classes in town and countryside to see very clearly that power is not in their hands.”

Power still in the hands of the proletariat – reformist strategy

From the fact that power was not in the hands of the bourgeoisie, Trotsky concludes that “power has not yet been torn from the hands of the proletariat.” Therefore, the oppositionists should carry forward a reformist political strategy. This is also presented in the form of the class struggle: “The struggle against the danger of Thermidor is a class struggle. The struggle aimed at tearing the power from the hands of another class is revolutionary. The struggle for changes (sometimes of a decisive character but still under the rule of the same class) is a reformist struggle.”

Temporary passivity of the working masses

In point 7, the text maintains that the Soviet working masses are politically passive. However, it emphasizes that this passivity will not last long and that the class is already beginning to awaken.

Stalin’s centrism

The text states that Stalin's group "has the features of centrism – moreover, centrism in a period of retrogression, not upsurge. That means slight zigzags to the left, and deep zigzags to the right."

The concept of Thermidor

Trotsky explains that Thermidor consists of a regime that carries out the transition of power from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie (let us recall that we are at the height of the NEP, which led to the development of bourgeois merchants, industrialists, and wealthy peasants). In item 6, he states that the task of a Thermidorian regime would be to place the most important political commanding positions "in the hands of the left wing of the new possessing classes."

Trotsky describes the Thermidorian regime as a "Kerenskyism in reverse," that is, a counterrevolutionary power camouflaged as revolutionary to reconcile *two powers*. In 1917, Kerensky's government operated a conciliation between the growing power of the soviets and the dying monarchical power. Now, Stalin's apparently revolutionary regime operated a conciliation between the weakened power of the soviets and the growing power of the bourgeoisie. In his own words:

"Thermidor is in its essence a transitional regime, a kind of Kerenskyism in reverse. [...] A Thermidorian regime would mean legalization once again of a dual power situation, this time with the bourgeoisie holding the upper hand, and once again, against its own will, such a regime would help one class, the bourgeoisie, wrest power from the other, the proletariat."

By analogy with what had happened with Kerensky, the text considers that this "Kerenskyism in reverse" would be of short duration. Stalinist Thermidor would not tend to last long.

Thermidor is not an accomplished fact

Starting from item III, titled "The question of 'timing'," the fundamental discussion opens again: has Thermidor already begun? Is it already an accomplished fact? Trotsky maintains his previous position that Thermidor is not an accomplished fact and argues against those who claimed that the expulsion of the Opposition from the party represented the beginning of Thermidor. He insists that Thermidor had not yet been realized: "However, does the expulsion of Oppositionists and even the formal amputation of the Opposition as a whole mean that Thermidor is an

accomplished fact? No, so far there has only been preparation for Thermidor within the framework of the party.”

Why? Because the objective economic elements had not yet been carried out by Stalin’s group: “But this process is yet to be consummated – in politics, in the economy, in culture, and in daily life. In order to assure the victory of Thermidor in fact, first of all, the monopoly of foreign trade must be removed (or limited), the electoral instructions must be revised, etc.”

The most probable outcome is the advance of the “right”

The text considers that the greatest danger in the period is the growth of the “right”, representing the “non-proletarian classes,” within the state apparatus. The perspective is that the state apparatus, representing the “right,” would tend to defeat the party apparatus, representing the “centrists”: “The Fifteenth Party Congress rather clearly revealed a reduction in the relative weight of the party apparatus in the general system of the Soviet regime. The Stalin-Rykov conflict reflects to a significant extent the struggle between the two apparatuses, which in turn refracts the struggle of classes.” Even so, the text considers that Stalin could “change horses,” that is, shift to the right in the midst of the process.

In the situation of economic crisis (derived from a new scissors crisis), the tendency would be the triumph of the forces of the right: “The most likely thing is that in the event of a further aggravation of the economic situation, the line taken by the right, which was foreseen quite correctly in the Platform of the Opposition, will triumph.”

The second party

In response to the accusation – presented by Stalin’s group – that the oppositionists sought to create a second party, Trotsky explains that this would be justifiable only on the condition that Thermidor were an accomplished fact. According to him, “the completion of Thermidor would inevitably mean the splitting of the party.”

The item VI concludes with the statement that if the right wing inside and outside the party unite and dominate the proletarian wing of the party, then this would lead to the fall of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and there would be no alternative but to create a second party. However, all this had not yet happened, and a second party was not justified. The fundamental line

to be applied would still be to remain within the party and avert the risk of the right by means of a struggle against the center: “the isolation of the right wing by the struggle of the Opposition against apparatus centrism for influence over the proletarian core of the party.”

On the bloc with Zinoviev and Kamenev

Item IX presents an assessment of the Opposition’s activities and makes clear how the capitulation of Zinoviev and Kamenev called into question the very correctness of the opposition bloc. The text argues that “the individual comrades who incline to this conclusion [that it was a mistake] do not consider the history of the bloc as a whole, but only the closing chapter of that history.” It argues that the formation of the bloc with Zinoviev and Kamenev served for the unified action of the most advanced workers of Moscow and Leningrad, giving the group a new practical and theoretical leap. This would also have occurred within sections of the Comintern.

The zigzag tactic of the Opposition

The document discerns three periods in the tactic of the unified Opposition, from April 1926 to the XV Party Congress. Each of these periods is characterized by “a rise in Oppositional activity, mounting to a certain critical point, after which came an unwinding to a greater or lesser degree, accompanied by a declaration renouncing factional activity.” For Trotsky, this cyclical tactic would be justified in a country with a proletarian dictatorship and a peasant social predominance, which had engendered the centrist bureaucracy. The tactic of the Opposition would consist in always going to the furthest possible limit, to show “the party masses once more that the goal of the Opposition is not a second party or civil war but rectification of the line of the party and the state by the methods of deepgoing reform.” The item ends by defending itself from the “critics of the Opposition,” who claimed that its tactic was one of zigzags.

Practical perspectives

In the conclusions, the document proposes three lines of action for the next period:

- Study: “Theoretical self-education is at the present moment the most important task of every Oppositionist, the only pledge of firmness which can be taken seriously”;

– Practical activity: “becoming actively involved in all proletarian organizations and all soviet organizations in general.” It reinforces that “oppositionists can in no case restrict themselves to the role of critics”;

– Appeal to the Comintern, so that the issues may be presented to all sections at the VI Congress of the International.

II. “Old Mistakes at a New Stage”

Decist text from early 1928, without clear authorship, in response to Trotsky’s text discussed above. The title makes an ironic reference to a homonymous text by Trotsky, written shortly before (September 1927), in which he criticizes Stalinist policy in the Chinese Revolution of that same year.

Trotsky’s text denies its own title

The document argues that Trotsky’s text, “At a New Stage,” is self-contradictory. Its title speaks of a “new stage,” but its content maintains all the assessments of the previous stage, as if the XV Congress had no historical relevance. In fact, as we have seen, Trotsky’s text maintains positions that Thermidor is not an accomplished fact, that power remains in the hands of the working class, that the proletarian dictatorship endures, that a reformist activity is necessary, that there should be no struggle for the formation of a second party, etc.—all conceived before the congress.

The Decist document states that all assessments are the same as in the declaration of August 8, 1927, when the opposition sought a bloc with Stalin. This would entail enormous risks of capitulation:

“The ‘assessment’ of the situation is entirely on the level of the statement of August 8, which was made by the opposition bloc with the expectation of a possible bloc with Stalin’s party apparatus. It carries with it, therefore, the possibility and even the inevitability of new capitulations. (Pyatakov’s treason must be regarded in this sense as a ‘first warning’).”

How does Thermidor begin?

The Decist document points out the contradiction in Trotsky’s conception of Thermidor. According to “At a New Stage,” Thermidor had not even begun, since it could only emerge after the end of the monopoly of foreign trade and the new electoral instructions granting greater freedom to the bourgeoisie. The Decists, however, argue that all these elements would be *results of Thermidor*, not the facts that would establish it:

“is ridiculous to say that the very process of the coup d’état ‘has yet to take place’, that one has to wait for the abolition of the monopoly of foreign trade, the revision of the electoral instructions, etc., in order to say what is there: all this, if the counter-revolution is destined to triumph finally, which, in any case, is

inevitable, will of course come in due course, but as a result and not as a condition of the Thermidorian coup d'état [...]"

Indeed, the Decist document points out that the revision of electoral instructions (the expansion of the political rights of the bourgeoisie) "is by no means necessary under the conditions of our regime. Before consolidating its effective rule, the bourgeoisie may, for some time, limit itself in formal political rights, transferring those rights to the bureaucracy."

The dictatorship of the proletariat no longer exists

For this Decist document, there was no longer a dictatorship of the proletariat. Not making this element clear, according to the text, would only prepare further capitulations. Unlike Trotsky's text, which had dwelt on the capitulations of Zinoviev and Kamenev, the Decist document was concerned with capitulation within the Trotskyist and Decist ranks. The Pyatakov case (not mentioned by Trotsky) appears several times in the Decist document. There were also among the Decists capitulations similar to Pyatakov's in the same period (such as those of Dashkovskii, Pilipenko, Dune, and others), in response to Stalin's "left turn."

According to the Decist document, Trotsky's own text was contradictory and, if his analysis were taken to its ultimate consequences, it would lead to the conclusion that the dictatorship of the proletariat no longer existed. The text says: "To define such a state as a 'proletarian dictatorship' is to denigrate the notion of proletarian dictatorship. If power hangs around between the classes, this is a transitional state, i.e. Thermidor, which, according to the authors of the document themselves, is a transition to Bonapartism." In other words, the "Kerenskyism in reverse" characterized by Trotsky would already express the existence of Thermidor; it would be the transition of power. In short: under the dictatorship of the proletariat, there is no way to conceive any form of Kerenskyism.

Incidentally, the document at no point characterizes Stalin's group as "centrist" – and even when it refers to the petty bourgeoisie, it does not clearly state that it would be the social base of the party apparatus's ruling group.

"At a new Stage" was unable to foresee the hardening against the opposition

According to the Decist document, Trotsky's text, due to these errors of characterization, proved incapable of foreseeing the imminent hardening of the regime against the opposition:

“The document was apparently drawn up before the campaign of mass arrests and exiles. Perhaps that is why it speaks only of ‘party methods’. But that is the half-heartedness of the authors’ position, that they were not even able to foresee such a turn of events, which could not have been different if a coup d’état had taken place. It is not the preparation of Thermidor, but Thermidor itself.”

The Decist document raises its tone: “The authors of the document are forced to recognize, one by one, the presence in the country of all those facts and signs which, according to their own definition, together constitute Thermidor. But they do not dare to call things by their proper names and draw the necessary political conclusions.”

The zigzagging tactic of the opposition

Regarding the “cyclical” tactic of the opposition, Trotsky’s document is severely criticized. For the Decists, the zigzag was closely linked to the positions of Zinoviev and Kamenev, who sometimes raised their tone against Stalin’s group, but always ended up – and Trotsky’s own document admits this – making unprincipled maneuvers to save themselves. Rather than being praised, such a tactic should be condemned as a form of centrism. The Decist document states:

“From this point of view it is absolutely incomprehensible on what grounds the authors of the document accuse Zinoviev’s group, which is also in favor of ‘reform’ and which made its statement also in order to ‘show the Party masses’ again and again its peaceful intentions, etc., etc., of treason against the opposition. For Zinoviev and Kamenev only continued for one stage the main line of the bloc. Meanwhile, the authors found the appropriate words to evaluate the ‘maneuver’ of Zinoviev and Kamenev at face value [...]. Why not transfer this assessment to the previous maneuvers of the bloc, which [...] only brought disorganization and discord in the ranks of the opposition?”

The reformist strategy

Since it does not consider that the dictatorship of the proletariat still exists, the Decist document *does not defend a reformist strategy*. In fact, it recalls Stalin’s statement that he would only leave power through a civil war and summarizes:

“At any rate, in these conditions, it is absolutely ridiculous on the part of the leaders of the proletarian movement to limit themselves in advance to the narrow framework of ‘reform’ and to abandon the revolutionary perspective, while the other side is by no means immune to the extreme measures necessary to complete and consolidate the counter-revolutionary coup d’état. Such ‘self-restraint’ of the opposition is a sure way to defeat.”

For the same reason, it considers that the action perspectives proposed by Trotsky for the opposition were not only timid but disheartening – a true program of inaction:

“In this connection one can only shrug one’s shoulders at the ‘program of action’ which the authors of the document recommend to the opposition after the congress. This program boils down to the dissolution of the faction (!), theoretical self-education, legal work in trade unions, etc., and ... and ... appeal [to] the Comintern. It is not difficult to imagine what ‘profound reforms’ can be accomplished through such methods of opposition work. This is not a program of action, but a program of inaction. It is a refusal to struggle.”

III. “On Thermidor and Centrism”

This Decist document, from August 1928, is titled in our Russian archive “On Thermidor and Centralism [Централизме].” It seems to us that “*centralism*” is an error and that the correct term should be “centrism.” It is also a response to “At a New Stage,” but in some points it appears milder than the previous one.

Against the idea that Stalin’s regime is a dictatorship of the proletariat

Also according to this text, considering that Stalin’s regime represents a deformed dictatorship of the proletariat is something that prepares capitulations (such as Pyatakov’s):

“When people say that Stalin, who is forcibly taking bread from the kulaks at fixed prices in order to feed the workers, is [implementing] the dictatorship of the proletariat, when people say that the ‘left’ resolutions of the ECCI Plenum testify to a serious shift of Stalin’s policy to the left, then there is only one step left before capitulation, for in that case the opposition’s differences with Stalin, if not eliminated, are at least greatly reduced.”

More detailed analogy with the French Thermidor

The text agrees with Trotsky’s analysis that Thermidor is a “particular form of counterrevolution,” a “counterrevolution carried out in installments, several stages”; a counterrevolutionary regime that initially relies on the governing party itself. The text, in this sense, is interesting because it elaborates further on the analogy with the French Revolution. Drawing comparisons between Robespierre and Stalin, it comments that the former’s order was crucial to remove from the National Convention the more radical clubs of the French plebeians, most notably the Cordeliers Club and the “Enragés,” followers of J.-R. Hébert. For this reason, the French Thermidor would have begun with Robespierre and “signified the evolutionary transition of power from the hands of the Parisian proletariat to the hands of the bourgeoisie.”

Is Thermidor concluded? Who holds power?

In this respect, this Decist text is more nuanced and complex than the previous one. According to it, Thermidor is a fact, but not yet accomplished, not yet concluded. It is something ongoing. The document maintains that the expulsion of the opposition is still not the completion of Thermidor. But it criticizes Trotsky’s text:

“One cannot think that if power is not in the hands of the bourgeoisie, then it is in the hands of the proletariat, and if it is not in the hands of the proletariat, then it is in the hands of the bourgeoisie (as if there were no others). In that case, there could be no Thermidor, no gradual process of power passing from one class to another, but rather a sudden seizure of power. It would be short-sighted not to see the third force standing between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie – the petty bourgeoisie, especially in a peasant country like Russia.”

The text is more complex than the other because it seeks to demonstrate that Stalin’s base would be the petty-bourgeois peasantry, particularly the lower stratum of that class (that is, the social sector closest to the proletariat) which, under the NEP, was being ruined in competition with the upper layers of the peasantry. Moreover, the text accuses “At a New Stage” of failing to clarify, at any point, what class forces lay behind Stalin’s group. In a certain sense, it conveys the accusation that part of the Left Opposition (Zinoviev and Trotsky) was under the influence of this petty-bourgeois layer.

As interesting as the analysis is, it seems to me that associating Stalin’s power with the petty bourgeoisie, particularly with the lower stratum of the peasantry, does not explain the later development of the ruling group’s policy, particularly forced collectivization. And also to state later that the clique’s policy strengthened the bourgeoisie explains little about Stalin having “sent the NEP to hell.”

Stalin as a centrist

The document, in several passages, also presents Stalin’s position as “centrist.” For example, it states that in critical periods of history, “when power passes from one class to another, when power fluctuates between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, for a certain period of time (while the balance is maintained), the domination of petty-bourgeois centrism is inevitable. The Stalinist regime is precisely such a regime.”

Dictatorship of the proletariat as a hollow form that conceals content

Like the previous Decist document (and agreeing with the dilemma posed by Bukharin), this one agrees that there is no middle ground between dictatorship of the proletariat and Thermidor. However, making the analysis more complex, it argues that the dictatorship of the proletariat continues *only as a mere form*, a kind of empty shell. This produces confusion within the Left Opposition. It says:

“The fact that power is not yet in the hands of the bourgeoisie, but only in the hands of the petty-bourgeois tail of the proletariat, and that the Thermidorian processes are not yet complete, confuses many people and gives them reason to think that the dictatorship of the proletariat exists because the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat has been preserved; many do not notice the changes that have taken place in the class essence of power.”

There is no leftward course (?)

Despite characterizing Stalin as a centrist, the document maintains that there is no leftward course of the bureaucracy:

“And those who see Stalin’s attempts to strike at the kulaks as a left-wing proletarian course are cruelly mistaken; they do not see the other side of Stalin’s course, they do not see the increasing pressure on the workers, the persecution of the opposition, and the expulsion of all supporters of the opposition from foreign communist parties and the Comintern. When Stalin strikes a blow and at the same time crushes the opposition, it means that there is no left-wing proletarian course.”

Somewhat contradictorily, the text admits that there was a “left turn” – but not a proletarian one: “A left turn in Stalin’s policy [поворот сталинской политики] [...] is above all the result of the left turn of the lower strata of the countryside, after they found themselves in the dead end into which they had been driven by the kulak [...]”.

The party faction struggle expressed the class struggle

Since the AUCP was the only legally existing party in the recent period, the class struggle, according to the text, had to be expressed *within the party*. The struggle between the proletariat and the peasantry would have been expressed through the party factions. In the beginning, from 1917 to 1921 (until the NEP), the proletariat had predominated. After the end of the civil war and the beginning of the NEP, the peasantry would have gained increasing political importance within the party.

However, for the document, the XV Congress represented the end of a stage or phase, for with it the intra-party class struggle would end. The proletariat had finally been defeated. Thus Thermidor would begin. The class struggle, now, would require other forms of expression.

No longer contesting the party

It would no longer be appropriate to conduct any reformist struggle, any contest for the party. Party struggle might still occur, but it would be something secondary, something like a by-product of the class struggle outside the party:

“There will still be internal party struggles. But they will not be decisive. Now everything depends on the outcome of the immediate class struggle. Our preparation for the coming struggle should not be aimed at victory within the party, as before, for that stage has already been passed, but at victory in the open class struggle with the bourgeoisie.”

Unlike what the opposition had done since 1923 – which had only contested the party base (and spoken to it) – the time had finally come to speak only to the working masses.

Second party

Despite all this, on the issue of creating a second party, the document seems to contradict itself. If it had previously stated that the class struggle would unfold outside the party, the logical conclusion would be the need for another party. But the text rejects this proposal:

“Under the present conditions, the organization of a second party would mean abandoning Lenin’s enormous revolutionary legacy in the form of the Comintern and the All-Union Communist Party and handing it over to the opportunists to plunder and use against the working class. The fact that the dictatorship of the proletariat no longer exists does not mean that a second party should be created. This would be the case if power were already in the hands of the bourgeoisie and the All-Union Communist Party had turned into a bourgeois party. But this is not yet the case. Power is in the hands of the petty bourgeoisie, and moreover, in the hands of that section of it which is more inclined towards the proletariat.”

Either the text is vacillating, or it reflects a tactical position within an internal dispute. Immediately thereafter, it states “we must, while remaining a faction of the opposition within the CPSU, systematically influence the party, [...] [to] support the proletarian section of the party, to take possession of Lenin’s legacy and use it in the immediate struggle against the bourgeoisie to restore the dictatorship of the proletariat.” On the other hand, it also says that “we must explain to all party and non-party workers that if it is impossible to fight for Lenin’s proletarian position within the ranks of the AUCP, then it is better to be outside the ranks [...] and not to pursue Stalin’s clearly disastrous centrist policy or, even worse, Rykov-Kalinin’s kulak policy.”

The text ends by maintaining that one must fight for readmission to the party, but not at the cost of abandoning principles and convictions, as Zinoviev, Kamenev, Pyatakov, and others did.

IV. Final remarks

The texts above practically do not touch on the topic of Bonapartism. At times, the term appears in passing, but more as a new regime to be realized by the bourgeoisie *after Thermidor*. The danger of Bonapartism appears to them as something still somewhat distant. The only document in our Decist archives that deals somewhat more with Bonapartism is Sapronov's letter to Smirnov, without an exact date, but certainly from 1929 or slightly later. Even so, the text seeks to rule out the use of the concept of Bonapartism for the reality of that moment. Likewise, in Trotsky's texts, the debate on Bonapartism seems to emerge only from 1929 onward.

As for Trotsky's final position, it seems to us that he himself later acknowledged the error in his analysis of "At a New Stage" (1927/28). In February 1935, in the text "The Workers' State, Thermidor and Bonapartism," he stated: "The year 1924 – that was the beginning of the Soviet Thermidor."

V. Comparative Table

	At a New Stage	Old Mistakes at a New Stage	On Thermidor and Centrism
Power in the hands of the proletariat	Yes	No	No
Power in the hands of the petty bourgeoisie	Not stated	Not stated	Yes
Power in the hands of the bourgeoisie	No	No	No
Thermidor begun	No	Yes	Yes
Stalinist centrism	Yes	Not stated	Yes
Stalin's leftward course	Yes	No	Ambiguous
"Cyclical" tactic of the opposition	Correct	Wrong	Wrong
Fight within the party	Yes	No	Ambiguous
Second party	No	Not stated	Ambiguous