Leon Trotsky was the central organizer of the Red Army during the Russian civil war, which raged from 1918 to 1921, when the first socialist revolution was threatened by the intervention of imperialist armies as well as by counterrevolution. During this period, Trotsky became known as the foremost defender, in the military arena, of socialist revolution.

In *Their Morals and Ours* we see Trotsky as an equally effective combatant in the arena of moral ideas. This classic defense of revolutionary morality is directed at those disillusioned intellectuals of the thirties who attempted to rationalize their departure from revolutionary Marxism with the argument that some abstract notion of morality, and not the necessities of the class struggle, should be the guiding principle for those who attempt to create more rational and humane circumstances of life.

This argument was not new when it was advanced in the thirties, and it has been repeated since that time in many different forms. But subsequent events have stressed the importance of Trotsky’s analysis of these critics of socialist revolution, emphasizing the validity of his revolutionary conclusions: “Only that which prepares the complete and final overthrow of imperialist bestiality is moral, and nothing else. The welfare of the revolution—that is the supreme law!”

Trotsky begins *Their Morals and Ours* by pointing to the effects of “an epoch of triumphant reaction” on backsliding
intellectuals and representatives of radical political currents. The rise of fascism in Germany had been the opening round in this triumph of reaction. In 1933 Hitler gained control of the state apparatus and proceeded to crush the last remaining organs of working-class power—all without any serious opposition from the powerful Communist and Socialist parties.

Hitler’s victory made the threat of fascism an immediate reality to people around the world. The Communist and Socialist parties advocated building coalitions with liberal bourgeois parties as a defense against this threat. In practice this policy led to subordinating the workers’ organizations to those of the bourgeoisie. The Popular Front dissipated the revolutionary aspirations of the French workers in the mid-thirties. But it was in Spain that the tragic effects of Popular Frontism were most crushingly realized. The revolutionary Spanish workers and peasants were prevented by their own leadership from taking power and decisively eliminating the fascist threat. By 1938, when Their Morals and Ours was written, Franco was in the process of cutting Republican Spain in half; total fascist victory was only a short time away.

Millions who looked to the Communist International and the Soviet Union for leadership were disoriented by evidence of the repressive measures Stalin employed against his working-class opponents. By the mid-thirties, nearly all of the prominent oppositionists had been exiled, imprisoned, or murdered by Stalin’s secret police. Following 1935, Stalin swept the country with periodic purges. This campaign of terror was elevated to the level of official policy in August 1936 when Stalin staged the first Moscow trial. Among the accused were such leading Bolsheviks as Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Smirnov. This trial was followed in January 1937 by a second one involving Pyatakov, Radek, and Muralov. In March 1938, Bukharin, Rykov, and other prominent Bolshe-
viks were put on trial, as well as secret-police chief Yagoda, chief organizer of the first trial.

“Stalin renders a commendable service to fascism,” Mussolini declared concerning this last spectacle (Popolo d’Italia). For Stalin had wiped out the entire leadership of the Russian Revolution. In 1937 Stalin topped off these services to reaction by shooting the leadership of the Red Army, including Marshal Tukhachevsky, without even a pretense of an open trial. This act militarily weakened the first workers’ state at a time when all the other European powers were rapidly rearming.

The most important targets of the Moscow show trials were Trotsky and his son Leon Sedov. In order to give Trotsky the opportunity to answer Stalin’s charges before world opinion, a Commission of Inquiry chaired by the eminent American philosopher John Dewey was formed, held hearings in Mexico, and examined all the evidence in the case. Although the frame-up charges were easily disproved before the Dewey Commission, they were supported by the resources of the Soviet state and slavishly affirmed by powerful political forces in every major country.

Meanwhile, World War II was on the horizon, providing an increasingly threatening backdrop to these events. Hitler’s rapid rearmament of Germany produced a reflex strengthening of patriotic sentiments in Europe and America. Trotsky and the movement he led continued to call for the mobilization of the working class against both fascism and the impending world war. But they were virtually alone. The radical intellectuals—who had previously defended Trotsky and the Russian Revolution—were thrown into a state of confusion.

Figures like Sidney Hook, Max Eastman, Victor Serge, and Boris Souvarine had already begun to disavow Leninism. Although not identical, their case histories had certain points in common. During an upswing in the radicalization,
they supported and popularized the ideas of Marxism; but during a period of “triumphant reaction,” they became the leading conveyors of demoralization into the revolutionary movement. By 1938 it was obvious that the negative side of their dual role was predominant. Rather than make concessions to these “carriers of infection,” Trotsky called for “a completely thought-out inflexible rupture from the philosophy not only of the big but of the petty bourgeoisie.”

All but a few of the disillusioned intellectuals of the thirties supported the imperialist governments in their countries during World War II. Some, like Hook and Eastman, drifted from liberalism to conservatism—a striking verification of Trotsky’s estimate that their moralism was “a bridge from revolution to reaction.”

In the process of their break with revolutionary Marxism, they raised the claim that Stalinism was simply an outgrowth of Bolshevism. Whether or not they had defended Trotsky against Stalin’s crude frame-up charges, the ex-Trotskyists and ex-Stalinists alike, along with the Social Democrats and liberals, used the Moscow trials as an opportunity to equate the “police morality of Stalinism with the revolutionary morality of the Bolsheviks,” of which Trotsky was the only prominent survivor.

Written in Mexico, his last place of exile, Their Morals and Ours is Trotsky’s response to these charges. Shortly after completing it he learned of the death of Leon Sedov, to whom he dedicated this essay. It appeared first in the Russian language Bulletin of the Opposition and then in the June 1938 New International. The Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism, written sixteen months later, takes up criticisms of Their Morals and Ours, including those contained in a prospectus to Victor Serge’s French translation (the appendix to this volume contains that prospectus as well as Serge’s denial and Trotsky’s reply). Minor corrections in the translation of the two Trotsky essays have been made for this edition.
Pressing political obligations prevented Trotsky from responding to the essay included here by John Dewey, entitled *Means and Ends*, which appeared in the August 1938 *New International*. The Marxist scholar George Novack, who had been the national secretary of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, reviews the debated issues and brings them up to date in his essay *Liberal Morality*, first published in the Fall 1965 *International Socialist Review*.

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