

Wrestling with Trotsky, Che, and Political Impatience



Daniel Bensaïd. *An Impatient Life: A Memoir*. Foreword by Tariq Ali. New York: Verso, 2013. Photos. Notes. 358pp. Hardback – \$34.95.

Daniel Bensaïd, raised in his Algerian Jewish and French Communist family in Toulouse, was strongly affected as an adolescent by the revolutionary movements in Algeria, Cuba, and Vietnam. At the university, he became swept up in and was soon a student leader of university strikes that set off the great upheaval of May 1968 leading to the strike by 11 million workers.

He would never live to see such times again in France, and seldom anywhere else in the world; he would spend his life, until he died in January of 2010, working and waiting for the revolution, thus: his *Impatient Life*. He became in his twenties a leader of the Trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and of the Fourth International (FI) based in Brussels and led by the economist Ernest Mandel. The LCR, led by Alain Krivine, was the flagship of the Fourth International and Bensaïd became one of its luminaries.

Bensaïd's memoir is in large part an account of his long years wrestling with the contradiction that stood at the heart of his politics, his party, and his International, the tension

between the European Marxist tradition and the Third World revolutions of the post-World War II period. Michael Löwy, his French-Brazilian comrade, writing in 1973 described the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR) of Bensaïd's student years (the predecessor of the LCR), as a "French Castro-Trotskyist" organization.[1] That contradictory phrase—that might better have been Che-Trotskyist—could also have described the young Bensaïd, and though he later recognized some of the problems that the tension between Trotskyism and Guevarism generated, he could never entirely shake his infatuation with Ernesto "Che" Guevara.



Daniel Bensaïd as a boy between his parents in the family's bar.

Bensaïd, born March 25, 1946, grew up in a Communist family in a leftist neighborhood. His mother came from a French working class and went to work at 14 while his father was a Jew from Mascara, Algeria, who had been a boxer in his youth. His parents ran a bistro in Toulouse, the social center of the local Communists and "solidly red." Bensaïd loved school and did well at it, and he loved his six-week each year in the Communist-affiliated CGT summer camp. Already as an eleven-year old he was aware of the Algerian conflict and by 1960

“open war” had broken out between rival student factions in his high school. His best friend Bernard gave him a copy of the *Communist Manifesto*, while his friend Annette loaned him political novels and poems. But it was the Paris police massacre in 1961 of at least 40 (and perhaps 200) pro-Algerian National Liberation Front protesters, part of a demonstration of 30,000, that led Bensaïd and his friends to establish a Jeunesse Communiste (Young Communist) group in their high school. Some of those in the group he soon learned were sympathetic to the Left Opposition in the party and soon Bensaïd had joined them—though he did not then think of himself as a Trotskyist. But it was not primarily Trotskyism that motivated the young radical:

In these years of the Sino-Soviet conflict, the Havana Declaration and Che Guevara’s speech in Algiers, Third Worldism had the wind in its sails. François Maspero published Frantz Fanon, with Sartre’s famous preface. We enthusiastically read Che’s *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, celebrating a socialist humanism, lyrical and generous, and light years away from the petrified speeches of the Kremlin apparatchiks.

Their not-very-clandestine opposition group within the Young Communists began by late 1965 to align itself intellectually with Trotskyism, reading Pierre Broué’s *History of the Bolshevik Party* and Ernest Mandel’s *Treatise of Marxist Economics*, but it was Che whom they held in their hearts. Within the JCR, Bensaïd writes, he “felt closest” to Jeanette Habel’s “more or less Guevarist views.” By 1966 Bensaïd and his fellow Guevarist Trotskyists had been expelled from the Communist Youth and, adding “Revolution” to their name, had founded the Jeune Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR – which later became the Ligue Communiste and then the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire).

In that same fall of 1966 he entered the Saint Cloud campus of the École Normale Supérieure, the great French public

university, as a student of philosophy, surrounded by “people [who] were more passionate about Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Saussure, Freud, Braudel and Foucault,” than they were about Plato and Aristotle. But politic discussion was everywhere and Bensaïd felt that as a member of the JCR he was in “a no man’s land” between the pro-Soviet Communists and the growing number of Maoists, “adorers of the Great-Helmsman-Red-Sun-In-Our-Hearts.” At Easter of 1967 he became part of the JCR’s national leadership as it became more closely identified with the Fourth International.

Meanwhile at the university, Bensaïd signed up to study for a master’s degree under Henri Lefebvre, the sociologist and former Communist—theoretician of the “critique of everyday life”—who had become one of the most important critics of the French Communist Party. Politically Bensaïd and other JCR activists cooperated with the anarchist group of Jean-Pierre Duteuil and Daniel Cohn-Bendit. When May 1968 arrived, Bensaïd became one of the student leaders, riding the wave of student and worker protests that crested in the general strike and occupations that paralyzed France. But by June the Communist Party had helped to restore order in the workplace and de Gaulle’s conservative party had swept the elections. The revolutionary fervor of May subsided. Bensaïd and his JCR companions considered May 1968 to have been the “dress rehearsal” for a coming socialist revolution—an event that never materialized. The 68ers, became as he writes in his introduction, “revolutionaries without a revolution.” But they were not yet aware of that.

The social movement subsiding, the Ligue now turned to electoral politics, running its charismatic leader, 28-year old Alain Krivine for president in June 1969 in an attempt to give political expression to the upheaval of the year before. Krivine to their shock and great disappointment got only 1% of the vote. With revolution in France apparently off the agenda for the moment, what should the Trotskyists do? Bensaïd

explains the tilt toward Latin America and Che:

Latin America was a kind of twin continent in our political imagination. Cuba had proclaimed itself the first liberated territory of the New World. Che had abandoned the exercise of power to devote himself to permanent revolution. No matter where death had surprised him...It was a remote and desolate Bolivian village. [Ellipses in the original.]

So, "In April 1969, the 9th World Congress of the Fourth International decided on a solidarity campaign with Bolivia" and "adopted an orientation of armed struggle in Latin America." At the same time, with a strike wave in Italy and labor upheaval in England as well, "Ernest Mandel predicted imminent revolutionary eruption in Europe." With revolution around the corner, the LCR also took up the problem of "development of our own military forces" and the plan for "subversive work in the army." The group studied an old Comintern book on *Armed Insurrection*.



Henri Weber, Alain Krivine, Daniel Bensaid, and Charles Michaloux in 1971 at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Paris Commune.

So began a decade or more of Fourth International infatuation

with Latin American guerrilla revolution and dreams of armed struggle spreading even to Europe. To give us a sense of the time and mood of the Ligue, Bensaïd quotes a line often used by his comrade in the 1970s from Trotsky's 1938 *The Transitional Program*, a line with Guevarist ring to it, "The crisis of humanity is summed up in the crisis of revolutionary leadership." If only the working class had the right leadership, leaders like Che, they believed, there would be a revolution and it would succeed.

Bensaïd, in fact, became the Fourth International's principal ambassador to the revolutionary organizations of Latin America from the 1970s up to the 2000s. When he went to Buenos Aires in October 1973, shortly after General Pinochet's coup in Chile that overthrew the elected socialist government of Salvador Allende, he noted that "Che's portrait could be seen everywhere." In Argentina, where, just a year, before a military dictatorship had been swept away by popular mobilization, there were frequent kidnappings and shoot-outs between leftist revolutionaries and the police. Argentine Trotskyists were divided between the group led by Juan Posadas who believed that Juan Perón's popular nationalism was progressive and the group of Nahuel Moreno who believed Peronism was a kind of pre-fascism. The Fourth International had little authority with either. Bensaïd was shocked when he saw what Che-Trotsky politics meant in practice.

Our comrades were young and intrepid, full of confidence in the socialist future of humanity. Three years later, half of the people I met at these meetings had been arrested, tortured and murdered. It was clear we were on the wrong path.

This was true of all of the Trotskyist groups, including those loyal to the FI: "We were running headlong into an open grave."

To his credit, Bensaïd drew the lessons of the experience in

Argentina, what he called "the most painful in my life as a militant. "My initiatory visits to Argentina," he wrote, "inoculated me against an abstract, a mythical view of armed struggle." He came to see that "Weapons have their own logic" and that "A military apparatus generates its own needs." He came to agree with Régis Debray, the French intellectual who had theorized Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba and Che Guevara's call for the guerrilla *foco* in *Revolution in the Revolution* but who by 1974 in *Critique des armes* had rejected the "hasty Leninism" of the guerrillas in Latin America. Che's revolutionary strategy had proven to be a disaster.

Yet, in the 1990s and even in the 2000s, Bensaïd still clung to romantic notions about Che Guevara. He could write in his memoir that the Trotskyists, who he believes understood Stalinism better than others, could, "without renouncing solidarity with Cuba in the face of imperialist threats and blockade," criticize and condemn the "gloomy bureaucratic affair" of the kangaroo court trials and execution of Arnaldo Ochoa and Tony de la Guardia in 1989, while remaining "more faithful to the spirit of Guevara and the revolution than a complicit silence." Even at the end of his life, Bensaïd remained under the spell of Che, Che who spent six years in the ruling elite and government of Cuba helping to lay the foundations of that bureaucratic system while inspiring Latin American young people to pursue a strategy that would not only fail to liberate the continent but contributed to a decade of extreme violence and the deaths of thousands of young radicals.

Bensaïd, while he recognized the terrible errors of militarism and violence on the part of the left in Latin America in the 1970s, failed throughout this book to come to grips with the central issue of Guevarism as revolutionary theory and strategy, what can be called "substitutionism," that is, the attempt to substitute a small group of dedicated radical activists for the working class. The theory suggested that a

small group's will to power and their skill with weapons would make it possible for them to lead a revolution by providing an example to the people. Substitutionism also meant attempting to bring about a revolution at once, impatiently, without having invested time in organizing in the working class. Impatient youth's slogan back then was: "We want a revolution and we want it now." To create the revolutionary group that could by-pass the working class, many on the left in that era concluded, one needed a Leninist party that could overcome the "crisis of leadership." It was there that martyred spirit of Che met the ghost of the assassinated Trotsky under the dry, severe, and academic gaze of Mandel.

The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and its comrades were, fortunately, able to overcome the legacy of Guevarist voluntarism and substitutionism of the 1970s and, through their work in labor unions and social movements, to remain a vital force on the French far left. By the 1980s they had begun to rethink their theory and to break with the post-war Trotskyist dogmatism as well as with the impatient Guevarism of the 1960 and 70s. Bensaïd helped this process along with a series of essays subsequently published in English under the title *Strategies of Resistance: "Who Are the Trotskyists?"* He redefined the Trotskyist tradition, recognizing that the Trotskyists included those individuals and groups, who had previously been considered apostates and heretics because they held the view that the Soviet Union was either state capitalist or bureaucratic collectivist, formed part of the Trotskyist current. Today's Fourth International partly through Bensaïd's effort has become a revolutionary socialist center which, while struggling in the Europe of crisis and austerity, has a growing influence in Asia, as well as member and observer organizations from various countries who hold a variety of views on theory and strategy.

What I have recounted and discussed here all comes from the first half, the exciting half, of an *Impatient Life*. The

second half of Bensaïd's memoir is a highly uneven mélange of historical narrations, essays, and meditations, some of them somewhat interesting, others not at all. In Chapter 12, "The Color Rouge," he discusses in passing the Ligue's "voluntarist proletarianization" at the end of the 1970s as members were encouraged to get jobs in industry, a development which "did not arouse unanimous enthusiasm within the Ligue." He also confesses that his book *Revolution and Power*, rejecting the feminist notion of the "personal is political" won him "a (deserved) thrashing from feminist comrades." There is a chapter (number 13) on the media and journalism based on a book he had written years before, which I found not at all engaging. That is followed, however, by a fairly interesting chapter on the crisis of Marxism, but one that doesn't address the problem of Che Guevara's influence which had been his own principal problem. Chapter 15 takes us with him to Brazil and the Trotskyists role in the development of the Workers Party of Lula, while Chapter 16 is an essay about Trotsky and Chapter 18 a rumination about what it means to be Jewish, secular, and leftist. Chapter 20, titled "A Thousand (and One) Marxisms," is a call for an open and non-doctrinaire Marxism, while Chapter 21 is an essay on *Capital*.

An Impatient Life is wonderfully illustrated with several pages of photographs of Bensaïd, his friends and comrades. American readers who are unfamiliar with modern European political history and French intellectual life may find this book with its scores of passing allusions to various thinkers and political leaders, organizations, and publications to be rather off-putting. Anyone who buys the book will regret that it doesn't have a bibliography or an index.

[1] Michael Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, economics, and revolutionary warfare* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 115. The relevant phrase reads, "Jeannette Habel, leader of Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire, a French

Castro-Trotskyist organization suppressed in June 1968...”
Thanks to my friend Sam Farber who called this phrase to my
attention.