Leon Trotsky led the Red Army to victory in the brutal and extensive civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution in 1918. He became a major opponent, and later a victim, of Stalin. In this 1920 discussion, he explains how terror and intimidation must be used to achieve communist revolution. He contends that capitalist society itself came to power through the use of force and that only force will allow the working class to establish its dominance. He argues that there is no real moral argument against the use of terror and violence. In particular, he directs his remarks toward liberals, who thought that social change could be achieved by parliamentary means, and against the German Marxist socialists, the Kautskians, who had argued that historical forces would bring about the revolution of the working class without the use of violence. These words of Trotsky help explain the fear of Bolshevism that swept across much of Europe immediately after World War I, a fear right-wing politicians manipulated during the 1920s and 1930s.

How does Trotsky’s justification of terror compare with that associated with the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution? How might the circumstances of the Russian civil war have led Trotsky to these views? Do you agree that the communist terror advocated by Trotsky differed from the repressive police policies of the tsars?

The problem of revolution, as of war, consists in breaking the will of the foe, forcing him to capitulate and to accept the conditions of the conqueror. The will, of course, is a fact of the physical world, but in contradistinction to a meeting, a dispute, or a congress, the revolution carries out its object by means of the employment of material resources—though to a lesser degree than war. The bourgeoisie itself conquered power by means of revolts, and consolidated it by the civil war. In the peace period, it retains power by means of a system of repression. As long as class society, founded on the most deep-rooted antagonisms, continues to exist, repression remains a necessary means of breaking the will of the opposing side.

Even if, in one country or another, the dictatorship of the proletariat grew up within the external framework of democracy, this would by no means avert the civil war. The question as to who is to rule the country, i.e., of the life or death of the bourgeoisie, will be decided on either side, not by references to the paragraphs of the constitution, but by the employment of all forms of violence....

The question of the form of repression, or of its degree, of course, is not one of “principle.” It is a question of expediency....

...Terror can be very efficient against a reactionary class which does not want to leave the scene of operations. Intimidation is a powerful weapon of policy, both internationally and internally. A victorious war, generally speaking, destroys only an insignificant part of the conquered army, intimidating the remainder and breaking their will. The revolution works in the same way: it kills individuals, and intimidates thousands. In this sense, the Red Terror is not distinguishable from the armed insurrection, the direct continuation of which it represents. The State terror of a revolutionary class can be condemned “morally” only by a man who, as a principle, rejects (in words) every form of violence whatsoever—consequently, every war and every uprising. For this one has to be merely and simply a hypocritical Quaker.

“But, in that case, in what do your tactics differ from the tactics of Tsarism?” we are asked by the high priests of Liberalism and Kautskianism.

You do not understand this, holy men? We shall explain to you. The terror of Tsarism was directed against the proletariat. The gendarmerie of Tsarism throttled the workers who were fighting for the Socialist order. Our Extraordinary Commissions shoot landlords, capitalists, and generals who are striving to restore the capitalist order. Do you grasp this—distinction? Yes? For us Communists it is quite sufficient.