

## From the French Resistance to Marxist History

### An Interview with Professor Pierre Broué

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By any standard of comparison, Pierre Broué, Professor Emeritus at Pierre Menés France University in Grenoble, has led an eventful life. From his early days as a resistance fighter against the Nazi occupation of France through turbulent days as a far-left union activist in the 1960s and 1970s to his current status as Director of the Leon Trotsky Institute and editor of *Cahiers Léon Trotsky*, Broué has been a conspicuous character within the European left.

His numerous historical works have influenced more than a generation of students and scholars. Among those are *La Révolution et la Guerre d'Espagne*, *Le Parti bolchevique*, *La Révolution allemande*, *Les Procès de Moscou* and *Leon Sedov: fils de Trotsky, victime de Staline*. Most recently, Broué's *Trotsky* has become a virtual best seller among historical works available in the French-speaking world.

Unusual among French leftist historians in his early rejection of Stalinism, Professor Broué has been one of the first western scholars to do extensive research in the recently opened Soviet archives. This has given him the satisfaction of proving many points which previously he could only speculate about. His continuing research in the Soviet archives promises to further clarify numerous issues concerning the history of the international Communist movement.

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*Pelz: First, could you talk a little about your family background and your life as a young man?*

**Broué:** My father was a State employee while my mother was a teacher. One of my grandfathers, who was the son of a poor rural worker, became a teacher because he was crippled. My other grandfather was a blacksmith by trade. I was raised in a little town in southern France, with no unusual problems. There were, however, the more general issues of the inter-war period: the rise of fascism, the general strike of June 1936, Spanish Civil War and finally war which led to the occupation of France by Hitler's army. These events certainly had an impact as they made me quite eager to understand the world. My parents, unfortunately, were unable to explain such complex world-historic developments. Rather, I was helped by the hundreds of books I read at the home of an old workers' movement activist who opened his huge and fantastic library to me when I was fourteen.

*Pelz: You were a member of the Resistance against Nazism in France. What actions in those days molded your latter life?*

**Broué:** I entered actively into the Resistance in October 1942 in Marseilles when I was sixteen. What molded my latter life was the general atmosphere, rather than one or another specific event or action. That is, life in perpetual danger, the duty to be very serious, always on guard, never late, to always keep your eyes wide open and so on. Although a Resistance member, I hated French chauvinism and felt the struggle against Nazism was an internationalist one.

What probably gave the greatest imprint on my latter life was what I saw, heard and, of course, understood during those days. For instance, in 1943, when in the mountains in an underground military school training Partisan officers, I learned how to kill and many other useful tricks like that for partisan warfare. We even played with our lives by engaging in Russian roulette with live bullets.

But I realized above all that the conservative Gaullist officers, who were commanding and training us, were anti-communist and thus very hostile to the workers who they considered a social danger. So, I found out that the Resistance was not a united movement. Within its ranks were people who wanted to restore the old imperial and colonialist France while others, socialists and communists of all brands, dreamed of changing France and the world into fraternal, equal, and free societies. Of course, I was with the latter.

Moreover, I met the "pariahs," people who were suspected to be communists, whom the officers refused to give military training. One officer confided to me, "We're not training officers for the French Red Army." So, suspected "reds" were used as porters of food, timber and so on instead of being given

weapons. One of them, a worker of twenty — I never knew his name — who had been sentenced to death by Vichy, decided to teach me the “lessons” of Marxism: history as a class struggle, importance and meaning of the Russian Revolution, and the like. After this education, I decided that I was a Marxist. Later I revolted against the chauvinism of the French Communist Party (PCF) and became a Trotskyist because, at that time, to be an international Marxist meant to be a Trotskyist.

*Pelz: Given the predominance of Stalinism in the French left, how did you come to take the side of Trotsky?*

**Broué:** Very naturally, although the Stalinists slandered anyone who opposed them and falsified facts to suit their political line of the moment. To struggle against them, one had to lean upon Trotsky’s writings. Being an internationalist, I became a Trotskyist when I broke with the Stalinist chauvinist policy. For me, in 1944, the only incarnation of Marxism was Trotskyism. I should add that I probably took the side of Trotsky because of the predominance of Stalinism in the French left. In fact, I broke for political reasons and fought against them for these same reasons. Only a little later, I combatted them on the ground of historical analysis.

*Pelz: What factors made you decide to become a historian? How did you resolve to become a history teacher/professor?*

**Broué:** I was always fascinated by history and read very many books. For example, I was only fourteen when I read Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*. To give another illustration, I found out that the Spanish Civil War was not what papers and later history books said. I met many young Spaniards about my age who told me their experiences. Nobody took their opinions into account. And it was their truth which was close to what I held to be “the truth” or a coherent analysis of a development.

Further, I learnt that life was contradictory. Official histories are always written in shades of day and night. Instead, I decided to write history with all its contradictions rather than writing this or that for the sake of a career. Still, I had to earn a living so I taught in secondary schools while I wrote my first books. Later, I was solicited to work on a PhD and finally secured a position in a University. Although I like to teach and talk about history, I never had any academic ambition and only became a professor by chance.

*Pelz: What do you see as the contribution of Trotskyism to an analysis of contemporary history?*

**Broué:** First of all, Trotsky’s works open up a whole world for the serious scholar. No historian did what he did in his *History of the Russian Revolution*

or his analysis of the rise of fascism in Germany. I have used his methodology and, on a much more modest level, my works upon Spain have brought a very new light to the history of the Spanish Civil War.

*Pelz: What have your relations been like with PCF historians? Has there been any change since the collapse of the USSR?*

**Broué:** Of course, our relations were typically as enemies rather than friends. We were in a type of war. They felt compelled to slander me, to depict me as an enemy of the working class and so on. In addition, we were adversaries in the teachers union — of which I was a leader for many years. We knew each other personally as well as politically. Some PCF members hated me but others did not. I always tried to convince my Communist colleagues to open their minds to other points of view on the left. Everything changed from 1968 on. In the past almost three decades, many former PCF historians have become my good friends with whom I fraternally collaborate.

*Pelz: Tell us a little about the history of the journal Cahiers Léon Trotsky. What impact has it had on the historical profession in France?*

**Broué:** I decided to publish this journal when I first entered in the formerly closed part of the Trotsky archives in the Harvard University library. It is difficult to objectively measure the publication's impact. The journals of the historical profession never mention us. Silence. The "milieu" was divided into two parts, Rightist people of the Cold War (generally formerly the strongest Stalinists like Annie Kriegel), and Stalinists. Both of these types hated our journal and, therefore, boycotted it. The journal advanced because students read it and these people later went into secondary school teaching and other such occupations. To cite one instance concerning this silence, my article on the 1932 Bloc of Oppositions was discussed in the United States, but never even mentioned in France. I must add that my former students often have had difficulty in finding suitable positions because their views are popular with neither the right nor the Stalinists.

*Pelz: In recent years there has been much discussion about new categories of analysis focusing on matters like gender and race while supplanting the old Marxist model based on class. What has been your reaction to this?*

**Broué:** Generally speaking, in recent years, there has been a general offensive against Marxism which is mainly what I think we must call an obscurantist offensive. Offensive against Marxism, against History, even against humanity in the last analysis. My reaction is the reaction of my whole life: to fight against these so-called "new" ideas which are, in fact, very old notions.

Several years ago, when the second centenary of the French Revolution of 1789 arrived, I thought: “What will they do? What will be their attack and how?” The answers to these questions came very quickly: this time they — officialdom and the academic bigwigs — tried to kidnap the Revolution itself. “*A French Revolution? When? Where? Never. You are dreaming, utopian Marxist! There is in the world nothing like a revolution. Forget it.*” What is new is only the impudence and the cynicism of these people from the moment they thought they could bury socialism and with it the working class movement. In fact, they were always the best helpers of the Stalinists who are now their main supporters.

*Pelz: Could you discuss your most recent work on Trotsky? That is, what is different about your book from other works such as the classic trilogy on Leon Trotsky by Isaac Deutscher? How has your book been received?*

**Broué:** This work is based on everything written or kept in the Western World about Trotsky along with depositions of his surviving friends. The goal was to revive Trotsky as he really was, with contradictions and defects, a hero but not a saint. Further, *Trotsky* aims to reconstitute the development of his life through real contradictions of world society, parties, Internationals, and so forth. I hesitate to comment on Deutscher’s work. After all, he was a brilliant writer and excellent journalist. But in his book, he is, above all, eager to demonstrate that Deutscher was right and Trotsky wrong. Moreover, he went too fleetingly through the most important documents and when he had no evidence, he speculated on the facts. Sadly, Deutscher was not a historian and his *Trotsky* trilogy has become a classic because it was the first attempt to analyse one of the most exceptional figures of this century.

My book has been brilliantly received in the French-speaking world, and even in the former Soviet Union. The only setback has been the adverse criticism of an American author, with no peculiar competence in the subject area. Because of this, the book has not yet appeared in the English language although Pluto Press had originally agreed to a translated edition. In France, however, the sales have been very, very good with 40,000 copies purchased in the first six months instead of the anticipated 20,000 sales the first year. In Italy and Japan, I am hopeful that sales of this title will likewise prove strong. At one point, I even had an agreement with the Russian Progress Publishers, but they backed off probably because of the influence of the anti-Marxist General Volkogonov, who is publishing the most ahistorical works about the Russian Revolution. In the United States, people like Ralph Schoenman did their best to prevent an American publication because of their sectarian so-called “Trotskyist” views since my vision of Trotsky differs from theirs.

**Pelz:** *You were one of the first western scholars to gain access to the Soviet archives when they opened. What sort of things did you discover which were notable or were revelations?*

**Broué:** It would be necessary to do an entire interview to fully answer such a question. Many vital pieces of information but no “revelations” in the sense of a scoop. I have used much of this evidence in my writings since *Trotsky*. Among these are: *Stalin and the Spanish Revolution*, *Rakovsky and Murder in the Maquis*. This last title deals with the assassination of Trotsky’s friend, the Italian Pietro Tresso (Blasco), by Stalin’s agent during the War in France.

**Pelz:** *I understand you are collaborating on a book detailing the possibility of revolution in Europe in 1923. Could you give some examples of the importance of this work?*

**Broué:** My German friend Bayerlein is preparing an edition of Comintern documents concerning Germany in 1923 and the so-called “German October” which was a fiasco. He has gotten every document on this badly known episode. My job is to write some notes and an introduction which will probably contradict the opinions of certain Russian historians. Yet, the heart of the work is the attitude of Comintern towards Germany and the real situation in Germany only a side-aspect of this attitude. I discuss this question which is at the heart of many polemics in the European left. I will try to show that the famous spectre of revolution haunted old Europe for centuries and decades, even in Germany, with all due respect to dear German professors.

**Pelz:** *What other projects are you currently working on ?*

**Broué:** In addition to *Cahiers Leon Trotsky*, I am publishing a journal titled *Le Marxisme aujourd’hui* on day-to-day political questions. For the latter publication, I wrote recently an article entitled “Is Marxism able to explain Yeltsin’s Russia?” I hope to try to make this into an international journal. In *Cahiers Leon Trotsky*, I am planning the publication of unknown texts by Trotsky from 1923 about the Russian Party, another project which concerns the Trotskyist attitude towards War and Revolution after Trotsky’s death, a topic I have found very enlightening.

More long term, I want to work on a History of the Communist International. This project is difficult to complete without financing trips to the Russian archives. Maybe, I will be forced to accept some more “commercial” publication in order to get money for stays in Moscow and the other archives. Of course, I often work free of charge, as I do now on a handbook for a Brazilian university. But for the next six months, I hope to concentrate

on the question of the Left Opposition and Soviet working class. Fortunately, I have just brought from Moscow and Kharkov many significant previously unpublished documents.

*Pelz: How would you estimate the significance of your writings?*

**Broué:** Well, this is a difficult question to answer. In my work, I have given the best of my heart and brain while often working under very difficult conditions. Normally, I work many hours a night and often haven't had money. In fact, after publishing *Trotsky*, I was ready to commit suicide because I despaired of my future life's work. To be honest, during long periods of my life, I have felt personally very unhappy and thought that I had sacrificed not only myself but also many beloved beings to my writings. The greatest joy, a wonderful feast in my life, was when in 1993 in Kharkov a wonderful young woman told me that, when she read my *Trotsky*, she thought I had written it for her. She was right! My book and this sentence from her are my most powerful reason of living. To answer less personally, I think that my writings were able to preserve not only a block of history but a stream of thought which will ease the task of young people who, someday inevitably, will be faced by a world revolution and a ferocious counter-revolution.

*Pelz: In conclusion, is there anything you'd like to say to left history readers?*

**Broué:** Yes, we are kindred spirits. When one compares articles in *left history* and my books, it is clear that we belong to the same family in this world. Please, use my articles as you like and publish any translations of them for your readers. It would make me happy!