

Robert Service: Trotsky: A Biography (2009)

INTRODUCTION

Trotsky moved like a bright comet across the political sky. He first came to global attention in 1917. By all accounts he was the finest orator of the Russian Revolution. He led the Military-Revolutionary Committee which carried out the overthrow of the Provisional Government in October. He did more than anyone to found the Red Army. He belonged to the Party Politburo and had a deep impact on its political, economic and military strategy. He was a principal figure in the early years of the Communist International. The whole world attributed the impact of the October Revolution to his partnership with Lenin. He and Lenin had their difficulties with each other. Before 1917 Trotsky had been an enemy of Bolshevism, and many Bolsheviks did not let him forget it. When Lenin fell mortally ill in 1922, the rest of the Politburo feared that Trotsky would bid to become his sole successor. The subsequent factional struggles brought disaster upon him and he was deported from the USSR in 1929 and given political asylum in Turkey, France, Norway and Mexico. His analysis of what had gone wrong with the Soviet state continued to have an influence abroad. Trotskyist organizations sprang up wherever political conditions allowed. Stalin depicted Trotsky as a traitor to the October Revolution, laid charges against him in the show-trials of 1936–8 and ordered Soviet intelligence agencies to assassinate him. In 1940 they succeeded.

He lived a life full of drama played out with the world as his stage. The October Revolution changed the course of history, and Trotsky had a prominent role in the transformation. Politics on the left were transfigured in every country; socialists had to decide whether to support or oppose what was being undertaken by the Bolsheviks in Russia. The foes of socialism were no less affected. Governments had to devise ways of counteracting the Communist International; and fascist parties on the political far right sprang up to prevent the further spread of revolutionary Marxism.

Trotsky felt pride about his accomplishment in the years of power and strove to justify the revolutionary measures of the Soviet government as well as the violence it deployed. As soon as he was appointed a People's Commissar he wrote commentaries and memoirs which described Bolshevik activity in the warmest colours. His works were distributed widely in the USSR; they were instantly translated and sold abroad in popular editions. For several years he was a best-selling author. About his literary and analytical brilliance there was never a doubt. After he was expelled from the Soviet Union it was only by his prolific writings that he could support himself and his family in reasonable comfort. He was taken seriously not just by anti-communist socialists but by a large number of influential commentators who detested Stalin's regime. Trotsky's explanation of what had happened since the fall of the Romanov monarchy in February 1917 took root in Western historical works. Trotsky's books stayed in print. His autobiography was a favourite among readers who wanted a general account of the October Revolution and its consequences. His political pamphlets were cherished by communist critics of the Kremlin. In his lifetime Trotskyist groups made a minuscule impression on

political affairs. After his death the movement went into a steady decline. A brief re-ascent occurred in 1968 during the students' disturbances in Europe and North America, but it barely outlasted the year. In the USSR he continued to be reviled until Gorbachev ordered his posthumous political rehabilitation in 1988. Meanwhile Trotskyists in the West continued to form their querulous groups, often campaigning for ideas that would have alarmed him.

Trotsky's account of his life and times, however, has maintained its deep imprint on Western scholarship. According to him, Stalin was a man of no talent, an ignoramus, a bureaucratic mediocrity. Supposedly Trotsky lost the struggle to succeed Lenin because the balance of social forces in the country was tilted in favour of bureaucracy. The Soviet administrative stratum embraced Stalin and rejected Trotsky. Thus the October Revolution had been doomed from the start unless it could break out of its isolation and link up with communist states in Germany and elsewhere. Stalin's caution allegedly betrayed the international revolutionary cause after Lenin's departure. Trotsky postulated that conditions in the USSR would have been radically different if only he and his faction had gained supremacy. He claimed that they would at least have struggled for the democratization of Soviet politics and held back the tides of counterrevolution, arbitrary rule and terror. He declared that the workers would have come to his side if they had not been prevented by oppressive police action.

The elegance of his prose was not the only reason for Trotsky's influence on subsequent historical thinking. His murder turned him into a political martyr who was often given the benefit of the doubt by authors who might otherwise have exercised their scepticism. A certain mental freewheeling was also at work. Trotsky had provided arguments that discredited the reputation of Stalin and his henchmen, and it was all too easy for writers unthinkingly to adopt them as their own.

Trotsky was wrong in many cardinal aspects of his case. Stalin was no mediocrity but rather had an impressive range of skills as well as a talent for decisive leadership. Trotsky's strategy for communist advance anyway had little to offer for the avoidance of an oppressive regime. His ideas and practices laid several foundation stones for the erection of the Stalinist political, economic, social and even cultural edifice. Stalin, Trotsky and Lenin shared more than they disagreed about. As for the charge that Stalin was an arch-bureaucrat, this was rich coming from an accuser who had delighted in unchecked administrative authority in the years of his pomp. Even Trotsky's claim that Stalin was uninterested in aiding foreign communist seizures of power fails to withstand scrutiny. Moreover, if communism had been victorious in Germany, France or Spain in the inter-war years its banner-holders would have been unlikely to have retained their power. And if ever Trotsky had been the paramount leader instead of Stalin, the risks of a bloodbath in Europe would have been drastically increased. Trotsky prided himself on his ability to see Soviet and international affairs with realism. He deceived himself. He had sealed himself inside preconceptions that stopped him from understanding the dynamics of contemporary geopolitics. (Not that Stalin was without his gross failures of prediction.) The point is that whoever governed the USSR effectively stood in need of deeply authoritarian methods to conserve communist power.

There is no denying Trotsky's exceptional qualities. He was an outstanding speaker, organizer and leader. He could easily have achieved a great career as a journalist or essayist if politics had not become his preoccupation. He had a sensitivity, albeit an intermittent one, for literature. He wrote about everyday life and cultural progress as well as on the more customary Marxist themes of his day. He had unbounded enthusiasm and commitment to revolutionary objectives. He inspired his entourage to feats of sacrifice. More than any other leading Bolshevik he conserved in his head a vision of a future world where each man and woman would have the opportunity for self-fulfilment in service of the collective good. He proclaimed this with passion to the day he died. Yet his portrait of his life and times involved many distortions – and these have clouded our understanding of Soviet communist history. He exaggerated his personal importance. His ideas before 1917 were nowhere near to being as original and wide-ranging as he liked to believe. His contribution to the Bolshevik advance on power was important but not to the degree that he asserted. Although he brought a unifying authority to the Red Army in 1918–19, he also provoked unnecessary trouble and made avoidable mistakes. In the ensuing years he remained volatile and untrustworthy. He lacked tactical finesse. He was an arrogant individual, and even in times of personal adversity in the 1920s and 1930s he dazzled his followers with his pre-eminence but failed to coax and encourage them to the full. He egocentrically assumed that his opinions, if expressed in vivid language, would win him victory. He was a better administrator than politician. Stalin outplayed him. Trotsky did not go down to defeat at the hands of 'the bureaucracy': he lost to a man and a clique with a superior understanding of Soviet public life. Fine oratory and well-turned pamphlets were no longer enough. Trotsky was addicted to the self-image he had acquired in the year of the Revolution. This did him no favours in later years.

Trotsky is usually regarded as a person with qualities that put him in a different category to Stalin. It is true that Stalin did things of a monstrosity which only a few dictators in the twentieth century matched. But Trotsky was no angel. His lust for dictatorship and terror was barely disguised in the Civil War. He trampled on the civil rights of millions of people including the industrial workers. His self-absorption was extreme. As a husband he treated his first wife shabbily. He ignored the needs of his children especially when his political interests intervened. This had catastrophic consequences even for those of them who were inactive in Soviet public life – and his son Lev, who followed him into exile, paid with his life for collaborating with his father.

Yet Trotsky also had beguiling qualities. It serves no purpose to pretend that he can be cut down to a regular size and shown to be just like the rest of us. So how exactly should we go about assessing him? Although he could be disarmingly frank he kept a lot to himself when publishing his autobiography and releasing selections of documents. This book's purpose is to dig up the buried life. Trotsky had a complex character and career. As with all the leaders of the October Revolution, the evidence starts with the works – his books, articles and speeches – which he published in his lifetime. Trotsky found some of them an embarrassment as his own political interests changed. But even if we examine all such works, we cannot leave the enquiry at that. They tell us about his big objectives

without always elucidating his personal or factional purpose at any given moment. As an active politician he could not always afford to spell out what he was up to. His letters, telegrams and other messages offer a way into that inner circle of his thinking. Even so, the dispatched message was often an over-polished object. In order to understand what he was planning it is also necessary to look at the drafts of what he wrote. The excisions and amendments tell us about what he did not want others to know. This is particularly true of his autobiography.

His written legacy should not be allowed to become the entire story. It is sometimes in the supposedly trivial residues rather than in the grand public statements that the perspective of his career is most effectively reconstructed: his lifestyle, income, housing, family relationships, mannerisms and everyday assumptions about the rest of humanity. There is little about this in his autobiography, but the information can be pieced together from his letters and jottings and from what his associates – from his wives and children through to his translators and slight acquaintances – remembered about him. As with Lenin and Stalin, moreover, it is as important to pinpoint what Trotsky was silent about as what he chose to speak or write about. His unuttered basic assumptions were integral to the amalgam of his life.

Trotsky hated to throw things away. He stuffed his filing cabinets with old ferry tickets, expired passports, unpublished memoir fragments and photographs of his rented accommodation; he once chided his longsuffering translator Max Eastman for crumpling up a letter from a woman in Ohio, USA, despite having no intention of answering it.¹ The result is that an abundance of material remains. It was a pleasure for me to unroll the original draft of Trotsky's history of the Russian Revolution which he laboriously shred, page by page, into chapter-length scrolls. Archaeologists who unearthed papyri in Egyptian deserts must have had the same tingling sensation. Yet Trotsky was not an ancient official, priest or trader but a twentieth-century revolutionary with his own typist and industrially produced paper. Acquaintance with his scroll-making eccentricity has helped towards acquiring a feeling for his ways of life and work. The extant films of his speeches prove that, contemporaries as attested, he really was a superb orator. His love letters to his first and second wives provide powerful examples of his passionate nature. Likewise the drafts of his writings, especially his scintillating autobiography, demonstrate just how fluent and exact a writer he was. When he amended a piece of writing it was often only in order to prevent some kind of political or social embarrassment. Stylistically he could shape his thoughts at the first attempt.

He also had mercifully neat handwriting. The beautiful little address book he maintained in internal Soviet exile in Alma-Ata in 1928 confirms that he was fastidious and well organized. Truly he was not much of a conspirator but occasionally he worked on this shortcoming, as is proved by the copy of Alexander Blok's published diary in which he used invisible ink to jot down instructions for his followers. Then there is the book on Marxism and philosophy by his ex-follower Sidney Hook: the exclamation marks he made in the margins testify to angry self-righteousness and intellectual self-regard. Equally remarkable are the hundreds of letters he sent to Trotskyists in dozens of countries, employing a bewildering alternation of pseudonyms (Old Man, Crux, Onken, Uncle Leon, Vidal

and Lund) – he needed a very capacious memory to keep abreast of his multiple identities. Trotsky left behind plenty of evidence that he was somebody out of the ordinary in matters great and small.

Like all human beings, he was an unrepeatable phenomenon. A Trotsky could anyway not burst upon us again for the obvious reason that too much has changed in the world, and a political comet of his brilliance would have a different composition and trajectory. Account has always to be taken of his times and his environment. He was born in a generation known for its revolutionary radicalism in the Russian Empire. He rose to prominence inside a party which seized power in October 1917 and proclaimed its determination to turn the world upside down. Trotsky did as much as anyone, except Lenin, to build the Soviet state in the first half-decade of its existence. But he did not have superhuman faculties. He and his comrades benefited from operating in circumstances of profound disruption throughout society. Otherwise they would never have been able to take and consolidate their hegemony in Russia. Once they had won the Civil War they still faced huge difficulties. The administration and the economy was chaotic; hostility to communism was widespread. The communist party itself was not a toy in the hands of the central leadership: it had to be managed and coaxed with care and compromise. For a while, through to the early 1920s, Trotsky behaved as if no constraints existed on communists so long as they showed sufficient will power, unity and readiness to use mass violence. He gradually began to see that this was utopian. But he never completely abandoned the unrealistic agenda he had held out to himself and to the party. He lived for the dream which many people found a nightmare.

That dream acquired its form incrementally over the course of his life. No one – or almost no one – who knew Trotsky as an adolescent or young man guessed what an extraordinary career he would have. Yet in retrospect some of the glimmerings were already visible in those early years, and we must now begin at the beginning.