

# SLAVIC REVIEW

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## Notes and Comment

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SLAVIC REVIEW

### LEON TROTSKY AS HISTORIAN

BY BERTRAM D. WOLFE

Like Thucydides, Xenophon and Josephus, Napoleon and Churchill, Leon Trotsky had to wait to write his major history until defeat had deprived him of the possibility of making history. But all his life he was a writer by avocation, and a history-maker by vocation. "Beginning in 1897," he wrote in his autobiography, "I have waged the fight chiefly with a pen in my hand."<sup>1</sup> When he was writing for *Iskra* he chose a *nom de guerre*—not to say *nom de plume*; it was *Pero*, the Russian word for *pen*.

Unlike Lenin, Trotsky looked often at himself in the mirror of history and consciously treasured his personal historic role. After 1905, in which year he played a more important part than any other revolutionary leader, he chose the first moment of respite, exile in Vienna, to write *Die Russische Revolution: 1905* (Vienna, 1908 and 1909). It is a book of 334 oversized octavo pages of social analysis, history, political polemics, personal narrative, and apologia. At present forbidden in Russia, out of print in Germany, and never published in English, it remains an extremely important source for the study of the 1905 revolution.

Leon Trotsky did not find time to woo the muse of history again until 1929 found him once more in exile, for the third and last time, on the Turkish island of Prinkipo. Then he wrote two works of major importance to the historian: his autobiography (1929), which of necessity contains much history; and his *History of the Russian Revolution* (Vol. I, 1930, Vols. II and III, 1932), which contains much autobiography, although he always refers to himself in the third person. It is with the character of this *History* that the present paper is chiefly concerned.

#### TROTSKY AS STYLIST

The first thing to note about Trotsky as historian is that we are dealing with a persuasive and frequently pedantic polemicist who was both

MR. WOLFE, author of *Three Who Made a Revolution and other works*, presented this paper at the Seventy-Fifth Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, December 28-30, 1960, in the session on "Statesmen-Historians."

<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York, 1930), p. viii.

a great orator and a great master of literary style. He is proud of the year 1917, telling of it as an old soldier reliving his greatest battles, for in it his role was huge, and his whole life until 1917 was dedicated to bringing about the seizure of power "by the proletariat," with which the year ends. If Lenin provided the party machine and the conspirative bent and concentration on power, it was Trotsky who provided the central doctrine<sup>2</sup> and the actual military-political strategy of the armed conquest of power. Trotsky's skillful and eloquent pen is here dedicated to the glorification of the Bolshevik seizure of power, the defense of his own role in it, and to the scorn, mockery, caricature, gross and cruel misrepresentation of all the defeated—a scorn that is more cruel when he deals with liberals, democrats, and the other socialist factions or parties than when he deals with the Tsar, the monarchists, or the reactionaries. One of his major targets is, of course, that doctrinaire democrat to whom he almost invariably refers as "the learned historian, Professor Miliukov."

Decorativeness, metaphor, and verbal fireworks come naturally to Trotsky. Thus of Skobelev, formerly his follower and in 1917 a leader of the Executive Committee of the Soviet, he writes: "He conveyed the impression of a student playing the role of statesman on a home-made stage." Of Chernov: "Abstention from voting became for him a form of political life." Of Kerensky: "His strength in the period of dual power lay in his combining the weaknesses of liberalism with the weaknesses of democracy." Of the Tsar: "Nicholas inherited from his ancestors not only a giant empire, but also a revolution. And they did not bequeath him one quality which would have made him capable of governing an empire . . . or even a county." Of the mob: "A revolution is always distinguished by impoliteness, probably because the ruling classes did not take the trouble in good season to teach the people fine manners." Of the Chairman of the Duma: "Rodzianko tried to put down the revolution with the aid of a fire hose: he wept." Of the Provisional Government: "It sneaked on tiptoe around the blaze of the revolution, choking from the smoke, and saying to itself: let it burn down to the embers, then we'll try to cook up something." Of the Socialists in the first coalition government: "Being obliged to enter the government in the name of the interests of the Entente front . . . the Socialists took upon themselves a third of the power, and the whole of the war." Bernard Shaw, himself no mean wielder of the snickersnee, wrote of this history: "When Trotsky cuts off his opponent's head, he holds it up to show that there are no brains in it."

<sup>2</sup> The Mensheviks tended to sum up their aims in the formula "bourgeois democratic revolution"; Lenin's algebraic formula had been "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry"; "people's government" summarizes the immediate aim of the Socialist Revolutionaries; Trotsky's formula was "permanent revolution, beginning as a dictatorship of the working class and ending in world revolution."

## REGISSEUR OF MASS SCENES ON HISTORY'S STAGE

As an orator in 1917, and still as an historian in the 1930's, Trotsky's first aim was to inflame the passions of the multitude, above all the passion of hatred. Not so much hatred of the Old Regime, which he detested coldly, pedantically, almost dispassionately, and which in any case was already dead and a mere ghost six weeks before Lenin returned to overthrow "the freest government in the world," and ten weeks before Trotsky reached Russia. Rather, it was to inflame hatred of liberals, democrats, liberal socialists, democratic socialists, pacifists, defenders of the new Russia and of that government which, unlike the one Lenin and Trotsky would set up, had the grace to regard itself as merely pre-legitimate and to call itself "provisional."

As an orator Trotsky was most effective at those moments in history when the normally passive and inchoate mass of unorganized men and women were stirred and shaken out of their habitual responses, and bewildered and made desperate by the mounting chaos of war, breakdown, and revolution. Then Leon Trotsky was able to move the mass chorus to the center of the stage, give it a sense of its own importance, enormous though transitory (in Trotsky's intentions and still more in Lenin's, the independent activity of the masses was meant to be transitory); then he could turn bewilderment and frustration into credulity concerning easy solutions and into anger, hatred, distrust, and scorn for all and sundry, except the Bolsheviks.

One of Trotsky's favorite audiences and participants in the mass scenes he staged were the sailors of Kronstadt. Having been held down by the despotic procedures of that tiny floating despotism, a battleship, they rose up against all commands, all discipline, all government. They rejected not only the Provisional Government but the All-Russian Soviet as well, setting up their "independent Soviet Republic." They jailed their officers without trial in the same hell holes that had been used to discipline them, and drowned or bloodily lynched many. "The most hateful," Trotsky observes, "were shoved under the ice,"<sup>3</sup> of course while still alive. "Bloody acts of retribution," he adds sententiously, "were as inevitable as the recoil of a gun."<sup>4</sup> Even when, for once, Trotsky tried to restrain the hatred he was playing upon (they were about to lynch Chernov), he did not forget to employ flattery: "You have come here, you red men of Kronstadt, as soon as you heard of the danger threatening the revolution . . . Long live Red Kronstadt, glory and pride of the revolution."<sup>5</sup> When he stood on Anchor Square in Kronstadt, egging on the sailors against the Provisional Government

<sup>3</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. Max Eastman (3 vols.; New York, 1932), I, 255.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> The episode is in Trotsky's *History*, Vol. II, but the words of Trotsky's speech are recorded in N. N. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution: 1917*, trans. Joel Carmichael (New

and the Executive Committee of the Soviet, he said: "They tell you that the revolution can get along without the shedding of blood, but bloodshed is necessary to revolution. The time will come when every public square in Russia will be adorned with that remarkable invention of the French Revolution which makes men shorter by a head."<sup>6</sup>

In 1921, Trotsky would direct picked troops headed by delegates to a Bolshevik Congress across the ice to reduce the "flower of the revolution" to submission, because they did not know when to stop self-activity and anarchic opposition to dictatorial rule, but this episode falls outside the scope of Trotsky's three volumes.

#### TROTSKY'S HISTORICAL METHOD

As a "Marxist" historian, Trotsky begins his work with an economic picture, proceeding from that to class structure, class struggles, class parties, and a class analysis of each action, speech, proposal, personage.

The economic picture begins with an account of Russia's backwardness, which to Trotsky has enormous advantages. These are not the ones usually noted, namely, that the later a country enters into industrialism the more it finds to borrow from the latest techniques of other lands without having to pass through the earlier stages and without being saddled with many obsolete and obsolescent plants. The advantages as Trotsky sees them are mainly political, and give rise to his enunciation of what he regards as the "fundamental law" of the Russian Revolution.

First, the more backward the economy, the weaker will be the bourgeoisie and the more retarded the democratic structure, which Trotsky ties dogmatically to what he calls the "bourgeois democratic revolution." Hence when Russia borrows the techniques of modern heavy industry, it creates a proletariat that is more concentrated, more powerful, and of course, more revolutionary than the bourgeoisie. Hence Trotsky's slogan of "No Tsar but a workers' government." The bourgeoisie is expendable, and along with it, the "democratic revolution" identified by him with its rule.

Second, the later in history a revolution occurs, the more "advanced" and "modern" is the ideology which it can import. Russia is overthrowing tsarism in the twentieth century, which—again dogmatically—is one century too late for a democratic revolution or a constituent assembly. "In the middle of the seventeenth century," Trotsky writes, "the bourgeois revolution in England developed under the guise of a religious reformation." In the eighteenth century, France was able to skip the Reformation. In the twentieth, after the flourishing of

York, 1955), p. 446. In Sukhanov's original *Записки о революции*, the episode and the words quoted are in Vol. IV, pp. 423-35.

<sup>6</sup> The words were cited to me by the late Wladimir Woytinsky, who represented the Soviet Executive Committee in the debate with Trotsky in Anchor Square. They will be published in Woytinsky's posthumous *Stormy Passage*, to be released by Vanguard Press in 1961.

Marxist socialism, "just as France stepped over the Reformation, so Russia stepped over the formal democracy."<sup>7</sup>

The Soviet dictatorship is, by definition, the dictatorship of the proletariat. (Writing in 1930-32 Trotsky gives no sign that it has turned out to be the dictatorship of a party over all classes, including the workingmen, in the proletariat's name.) Hence it dispenses with "pure democracy" as the French Revolution did with "the Reformation." These propositions concerning "backwardness" and "borrowing" form the core of Trotsky's famous "law of combined development."

This "general law" leads to innumerable deductions, inferences, corollaries, and obiter dicta, of which the following is a typical example:

We may lay this down as a law: Revolutionary governments are the more liberal, the more tolerant, the more "magnanimous" to the reaction, the shallower their program, the more they are bound up with the past, the more conservative their rôle. And the converse: the more gigantic their tasks and the greater the number of vested rights and interests they are to destroy, the more concentrated will be the revolutionary power, the more naked its dictatorship.<sup>8</sup>

Such propositions are invariably treated as self-evident, and are at hand to settle any question.

No less self-evident, and easy to manipulate dogmatically, does our historian find the concept of class. For Trotsky it is an axiom that only one class must lead in a twentieth-century revolution, and only one emerge from it as the sole and necessarily dictatorial ruler: namely, the proletariat. It is no less axiomatic that there is only one party that is proletarian and socialist; all the rest are bourgeois, or—at once more gently and more scornfully—petty bourgeois.

If a party believes that the people (*narod*) should make the revolution and the people should rule, and that *narod* includes both peasants and workers, and even intellectuals—as did the Socialist Revolutionary Party—that party is petty bourgeois. Even if a party shares the same program with the Bolsheviks, as the Mensheviks did between 1903 and 1919, that does not entitle it to the cachet of proletarian or socialist. Those are accolades reserved by history for the Bolsheviks, the party of Lenin and Trotsky. This makes all political history beautifully simple.

Any resolution of the Soviet Executive, made up overwhelmingly until October of Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, with a Bolshevik minority, is automatically a bourgeois decision, unless the Bolsheviks propose and vote for it.

The Moscow City Duma, elected by a vote that was 58 per cent Socialist Revolutionary, a little under 12 per cent Menshevik, and a few percentage points less Bolshevik, with about 17 per cent Constitu-

<sup>7</sup> Trotsky, *History*, I, 14-15.   <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

tional Democrats and virtually no reactionaries, whenever it takes a decision against the vote of the Bolsheviki, is said to represent the bourgeoisie or the "pressure of bourgeois circles."

The war is equally uncomplicated. It is bourgeois imperialist by definition. Hence all who wish to continue it—even if they overthrow Miliukov for giving expression to "imperialist aims," if they try to force on the Allies and the Central Powers an early peace without victors or vanquished, if they are for self-determination for all peoples, even if they are merely in favor of defending revolutionary Russia against invasion, or for a separate peace without further revolution in Russia and without world revolution—they are all bourgeois imperialist by definition.

The problems of power—of provisional government, dual power, soviet power, constituent assembly, democracy, and dictatorship—are solved just as easily and infallibly by the chanted formulae of this sorcerer's apprentice.<sup>9</sup> The Provisional Government is capitalist by definition. The dual power is a simultaneous rule by "two classes," the one grouped around the Provisional Government, and the other, that of "the workers and soldiers," grouped around the Soviet. That makes the Provisional Government, *ipso facto*, bourgeois. But if the Soviet does not take all power into its hands, and continues to support the Provisional Government, that makes the Soviet majority, its leadership, and its actions, bourgeois too. Or petty bourgeois. (The petty bourgeois seems to be one who is bourgeois without knowing it.)

What if the Soviet should take all power, the slogan around which the epic battle is waged throughout most of these three volumes? One would think that this must represent the triumph of the proletariat. But not so fast! The Soviets, from February through September still have a democratic socialist, hence a petty bourgeois, majority. The seizure of all power by the Soviet would only transfer the battle for power to a more favorable battleground. Only when the Bolsheviki have won a majority will this organization of "workers and soldiers" become "proletarian." And then its proletarian transfiguration will be automatic. "Only the guiding layers" (he means thereby the Bolshevik Party) "have a political program. . . . Without a guiding organization the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam which is not enclosed in a piston-box."<sup>10</sup>

Clearly the Constituent Assembly is no proper piston box or piston for the steam of the locomotive of history. This, too, is clear by definition, for the Constituent Assembly is nineteenth century; it represents "pure" or "formal" democracy; it gives representation to the nation, the whole people, that is, all classes of the population. Hence it cannot serve twentieth-century socialism nor the proletarian dictatorship nor

<sup>9</sup> The justification for this term will be found in the last sentence of this article.

<sup>10</sup> Trotsky, *History*, I, xviii-xix.

the rule of the "guiding layers." Any who in 1917 work for the fulfillment of the century-old dream that the Russian people should at long last determine their own destiny in freedom and write for themselves a charter of public liberties and social reforms, are fit only to be condemned as at best petty bourgeois, to be cast aside, and, in the end, denied the freedom to form a party or voice a program. Those who urge that land committees prepare a fair and systematic transfer of the land to the peasants, but want to wait for the completion of the program and its ratification by the Constituent Assembly, are caught in the same net of annihilation by labels.

If it is true that on the eve of the seizure of power, when Trotsky delivered his presidential address on his election to the presidency of the Petrograd Soviet, he solemnly pledged: "We shall conduct the work of the Petrograd Soviet in a spirit of lawfulness and of full freedom for all parties. The hand of the Presidium will never lend itself to the suppression of the minority."<sup>11</sup>

But as historian, Trotsky prefers to forget this pledge. This is one time he neglects to record the unforgettable words of Leon Trotsky. When Sukhanov, three years after the Bolshevik seizure of power, reminded him of the pledge, he lapsed into silence for a while, then said wistfully: "Those were good days."<sup>12</sup>

#### WHAT THE HISTORIAN WILL FIND IN THIS HISTORY

I cannot close this all too brief analysis of these three stout volumes without at least a word on what the historian will find in them.

First, there is a powerful and eloquent statement of the doctrines and dogmas that guided Lenin and Trotsky in 1917.

Second, there are brilliant word pictures of scenes of revolution and masses in action.

Third, there are remarkable profiles, for the most part one-sided and unfair to the point of caricature, but always vivid and revealing, of all the principal actors.

Fourth, there is an account, unparalleled in historical literature, of the strategy and tactics, the military moves, in the preparation of the deceptive conspiracy of October to seize power under the guise of merely defending the revolution. Trotsky exults in his skill in disguising every step in the offensive as a defensive action, and enjoys now his recollection and meticulous exposition after the events of all the details which he knew better than any other man, even Lenin; for it was he, as Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Committee and Petrograd Soviet, who plotted every step, wrapped each maneuver in the splendid impudence of his eloquence, and personally directed the fulfillment of each measure. The chapters on the "Military Revolu-

<sup>11</sup> Суханов, *Записки . . .*, VI, 188 ff.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.



tionary Committee and on the "Conquest of the Capital" are not equaled by all the other literature on the event put together.

Fifth, this history lays bare, both where it intends and where it does not intend, the soul of one of the principal actors in the October Revolution—at the moment of consummation, the most important actor.

Finally, it is a history which no historian of Russia and no historian of revolution can afford to neglect. But let him be forewarned that Trotsky's is a pen that is frequently as persuasive as it is continuously one-sided. It is always the historian's duty, too often neglected in our craft out of worship of the bitch-goddess Success, to seek out the truths of the defeated along with the truths that get published by the victors. But particularly here must the reader come well equipped with an awareness of the truths of the defeated—the more so because somewhere concealed in this blinding flood of words which record the victory of Trotsky and his party, are also some of the secrets which explain why Trotsky, too, must in the end be reckoned as one of the defeated.