

The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky

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This is basically a story of Trotsky written by his widow as told to Serge, who has held the pen. Some paragraphs are straight out of her mouth in the first person, others refers to V.Segre in third person, strange in a book to refer to one of its authors in that way. A text had been produced, and the assignment of authors turns out to have been an afterthought.

Anyway the book gives a summary of what the much more extensive three part biography by Deutscher provides, and neither contradicts it not add anything essentially new. So late us but do a brief recapitulation. The brilliant student Trotsky becomes acquainted with Marx in his let teens (skeptically so at first according to Deutscher) and gets involved in revolutionary circles, leading to a brief banishment to Siberia together with his first wife and two daughters, out of which he has no difficulty escaping to the West. Meets Lenin in London and a host of other exiled revolutionaries, as well as meeting his second wife Sedova. He returns to Russia during the revolutionary years 1905-06 where he takes an active part, but is arrested and sentenced to life time exile to Siberia, but once again he has no difficulty escaping during those lax Tsarist times. He spends the next decade or so in Europe, mostly in Vienna, then is exiled to the States from which he manages to make a return to Russia after the February revolution of 1917. He becomes a Bolshevik after having been a Menshevik up to then, and takes a very active part in making a push for power in October 1917. His relations with Lenin, which initially had been cordial, had then cooled to the point of open hostility, only to lead to a reconciliation in 1917, both men realizing that they had very much in common.

The take over is a success but the situation of the new regime is very tenuous, first a peace with Germany has to be concluded. Due to the disastrous performance by the Russians, the Germans can more or less dictate the conditions, and Trotsky is given the thankless task of heading the negotiations, which he does with aplomb. In the mean time a Civil War, with some limited foreign involvement ensues and Trotsky is given the task to create an army (the Red Army, as opposed to the White armies under Wrangel and others) to defend the new regime. He manages to create one out of almost nothing as well as to prevail. At the same time the newly independent Poland under Pilsudsky carries on an aggressive policy and conquers part of Ukraine and repulses an ill-thought attempt of the Soviets to go for Warsaw. Eventually the Red Army wins the contests and the country is in disarray, ravaged by the war. In order to appease peasants and ensure an agricultural production the so called NEP is introduced as a concession to capitalism and private profits. It is quite successful and the country rebounds economically. In the meantime Lenin's health deteriorates with a succession of successively more and more debilitating strokes. In the meantime Stalin starts to build up his power base exploiting the potential of his formal post as chairman of the party. Lenin sees what is coming and warns about the rise of Stalin, whom he previously had supported. The death of Lenin in early 1924

also spells the doom for Trotsky, who recuperating down by the Black Sea is prevented from attending the funeral (along with the bizarre step of embalming the corpse and the erection of an mausoleum to house it as a saintly relic to which one supposedly should pay obsequies).

Trotsky is still a member of the Politbureau, but he is being successively marginalized. A campaign against him is orchestrated by Zinoviev and Kamenev in collusion with Stalin asking for his resignation and expulsion from the party. Trotsky is advocating a rapid industrialization and taxes on the rich peasants, which will later be adopted in perverted form. He is stripped of his role as Commissar of War and being the head of the Red Army. An opposition, with him as the head, is formed against the politics of the Politbureau. Zinoviev and Kamenev are getting cold feet fearing Stalin and make overtures to Trotsky (something Stalin is not above either). Stalin now forms an alliance on the right with Bukharin ostensibly to support the peasants the cause of which Bukharin is championing. The official campaign against Trotsky is intensified. He is stripped of his position and exiled to Alma Ata while his supporters are being imprisoned and exiled and occasionally being killed. A year later he is expelled out of the Soviet Union and banished to the Prinkipo Island outside Istanbul. There he spends a few years, before being expelled again, and finding a sanctuary in Norway by way of France and Belgium. However, the Soviet authorities are putting pressures on the Norwegian Government which caves in and he is expelled to Mexico, where he has influential friends such as Diego Rivera and being viewed sympathetically by the Socialist President. He first lives with the artist, but then finds his own abode. He is subjected in May 1940 to a failed attempt at assassination organized by the painter Siqueiros, but succumbs a few months later to an assassin (armed with an ice-pick hidden under his raincoat) who had wormed himself into his reluctant confidence¹ The incredible thing is that he was able to fight back, although the pick had penetrated some three inches into his brain, and that he was able to live on for a day or so, even giving some indications that he might rally. Still compared to many of his fellow Old revolutionaries, he was lucky. He was spared the humiliation of bogus confessions and brutal imprisonment ended by execution.

The Moscow trials were followed by Trotsky with indignation and investigations into the innocence of the accused, thankless work as the numbers increased rapidly. He himself was implicated in absentia and there were even a commission headed by Dewey as to his looking into his own guilt², which not surprisingly led to his being cleared of any allegations levied against him. It is interesting to recall that the US in the thirties during the New Deal, the notion of Socialism was not necessarily negative as it would be conceived of today, yet of course he was not given a sanctuary in the States.

By reading the biographies of Trotsky the obvious message that comes across is that Bolshevism was a good thing, but that it was betrayed by Stalin. Had Trotsky won the struggle for power, the future of Socialism would have been very different in the Soviet Union, and it is of course a very seductive idea. The personalities of Trotsky and Stalin are very different, and as a result the intellectual arrogance of Trotsky made him grossly

¹ Trotsky did remain suspicious though and often expressed a desire to find out who that person really was, but he never got around to it.

² He conducted himself admirably in English, a language relatively low on his list of command.

underestimate his adversary. Trotsky is depicted as a brilliant and tireless intellectual, who also showed great personal courage and impressive practical competence, whose virtues can readily be appreciated even by those who do not at all share his political convictions. Stalin on the other hand emerges in comparison as almost illiterate, admittedly cunning but in intellectual matters rather stupid. Bland in personality with little if any charisma (although on photos he comes across as a rather convivial fellow unlike Trotsky himself who appears slightly repulsive). Ostensibly Trotsky was fired by idealism and a mission going way beyond his own personal sphere, while Stalin seems only to have been led by personal greed for power of which he became progressively more and more jealous, being vengeful in temperament he naturally developed a deep-seated paranoia. However, one should not underestimate him. Lenin thought of him as the only serious rival to Trotsky (and his later condemnation and disillusion did not affect that judgment, rather reinforcing it) recognizing in him qualities of practical leadership, he did not see in his old Bolshevik companions Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin. Posterity would give him right.

Trotsky was not a meek person and could display ruthlessness as well, as testified by the Civil War. Enforced labor and similar measures would not have been unthinkable to him, in fact he conceived of the running of factories in the same way as running armies, when overriding strategic considerations make the lives of soldiers cheap and dispensable. Serge, in an appendix added to the bibliography, writes with some distaste on Trotsky's arrogance, how he was convinced of his intellectual superiority and thus of his unique possession of truth. His ideological commitment (like that of Robespierre?) made him impervious to the seductions of corruption, and thus very dangerous in a position of power. However, the genius of Stalin was to found in his ability to attain and maintain power, making it a goal by itself, while for Trotsky power was ostensibly only a means to an end. His ideological commitment was at its root religious in its intensity and self-righteousness. Admittedly he was an atheist and did not believe in God, at least not as that entity is classically presented; but the basis of his ideology was the trust in the Proletariat, which he identified with the masses making up the majority of humans. Thus essentially an abstraction, as all classical deities, but which he was not above to attribute human qualities to, such as intentions and wisdom. The abstract entity of the Proletarian did, at least formally, play the same role as God in traditional religion. Something to whose transcendental will you have to submit and whose deep wisdom you better tap. It is true that he did not attribute any omnipotence, to promote it you needed to fight the forces of evil, and victory was far from being guaranteed. Of course in Marxist thought the ultimate victory was assured, as you could not fight against history. Admittedly in the modern view of physical reality you cannot fight against increasing entropy either and our fate is ultimately doomed.

How democratic was Trotsky? When things are not going your way you tend to think of it as a suppression of democracy, on the other hand when they do, or are about to, democracy becomes somewhat of a nuisance unnecessarily interfering. The very fact that the power structure of the Bolshevik society was in place at the onset, ahead of Stalin (who was but a peripheral revolutionary, be one of commendable devotion), with effectively only one Party in power the danger of Society and Party merging into one was imminent. It was also crying out for a strong man, as it provided not only the opportunity for one, but

also the need. There might have been one opportunity for the party to split into two as the conflict arose, but the pressure to unify, and hence stamp out opposition and even more so dissension, was very strong.

When it came to actual policies Stalin, having few of his own, more or less adopted the ones proposed by Trotsky, principally that of a rapid industrialization; but like the story of the brothers in H.C.Andersen's Story of 'Lille Claus og Store Claus', Stalin (Store Claus) perverted Trotsky's (Lille Claus) suggestions, by a failure to understand them properly and instead implemented them literally. But unlike the story of Andersen (which I consider one of the most fascinating ones in his work) Stalin got the better of Trotsky and outwitted him in the game of his own choosing and which mattered. Under Trotsky, the rapid industrialization would probably have been conducted far more rationally and supposedly more effectively, and the dealings with the peasants, especially those identified as the 'Kulaks' would have been more pragmatic and gentle. However, any counterfactual speculation in history, carries with it dangers and logical fallacies, after all people are not fixed but change under the pressures of events, and it is hard indeed to predict those changes in the abstract. And far more fundamentally what does it mean to compare? Had Trotsky taken the lead, Stalin would no doubt have been forgotten; Trotsky's regime would also have been hard and brutal and obviously attracted a lot of criticism which would not have been mitigated by the fact that Stalin's regime was so much worse, because after all, it would not have been there to be considered, and it would have been rather far-fetched to argue that the obscure Stalin would have provided a much more brutal regime than Trotsky; although such arguments could have been made nevertheless, but then any atrocity can be excused on the grounds of it could have been far worse.

Then another great difference between Stalin and Trotsky was that the former limited the scope of the Revolution to be local, true to being a political and bureaucratic mind, his visions were limited, Trotsky saw no such intrinsic limitations, but on the contrary he thought that without a world-wide revolution, Socialism in one country would be doomed. How would that have been worked out in practice?

Would things have been much better if there would not have been a Russian Revolution, neither the mild one in February nor the more radical insurrection in October (o.s.). Russia was an old-fashioned country yet it was being modernized. Could that process instead have been reached in a gentler and more 'civilized' way? The disastrous war certainly brought the country into chaos, and after the February revolution it was in such a chaotic state, that only the Bolshevik party had the organization and will to handle that chaos, a point of view, proposed by H.G.Wells among others, and probably confirmed by many historical interpreters³. The defeat in the First World War also brought a revolution of sorts in Germany, but one whose ramifications were confined by a more stable and developed society; although the monarchy was abolished as in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that suffered a more or less complete disintegration on ethnic lines. The aftermath of the First World War brought many collective movements of questionable moral and democratic valor, to the fore. More or less immediately so in Italy, with some delay in Germany. The American diplomat Kennan called the alliance between France and Russia

³ In elementary school we were told by our teacher that the reason the Bolsheviks came to power was that the first insisted on continuing the war. There is much truth to that.

a fateful one, and it certainly was. Germany is traditional thought of as the belligerent foe and the more or less sole provocateur of hostilities, yet French adventurism also played a significant role. The advent of the First World War was really the cataclysm of the first part of the 20th century to an extent most people do not really appreciate. It set back economical development by fifty years if not more, and disrupted a growing globalism, which of course carries with it, its own problems and regrets.

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