

# The Prophet Armed

*A Biography of Leon Trotsky*

*I. Deutscher*

October 15 - November 1, 2020

Revolutions are effected and directed by intellectuals. This was certainly the case of the French Revolution which degenerated into a reign of terror and was later absorbed by the rise of Napoleon and cast with him a shadow across the entire 19th century. France was one of the most advanced countries in the world culturally and scientifically as well as economically. The French Revolution would be followed by two minor revolutions, those of 1830 and 1848 which would have undeniable impact but not involve any violent transformations of society and leave society shaken but not destroyed. That century was a century of revolutions, or rather dreams of revolutions and saw the emergence of a new class of citizens, namely the intelligentsia. Of course intellectuals have always existed in societies but forming either an established class of clergy or a thin elite of professionals: lawyers, professors, and scientists. The intelligentsia of the 19th century was particularly focused on society and how to change it, with Marx as the prime example. The special nature of the intelligentsia came to the fore in Russia, which was very poor and very primitive but a strong military power as a result of the attempt at modernization by Peter the Great in the beginning of the 18th century. The Russian intelligentsia was split between the Slavophiles who saw a special mission of the country as being apart from Europeans, and the Westernizers who saw the West as being its only option to rise above poverty and primitiveness. Thus there formed a thin elite of people who had acquired Western ways and Western culture, predominantly restricted to St-Petersburg, which was a futuristic city (at the time) built on marshes, which actually were still part of Swedish territory. St-Petersburg, the new capital, was thus peripherally located in Russia and meant as an outpost to the West.

Terrorism has always existed, but it got revived in Russia as a political weapon, targeting not innocent bystanders, but individuals of power and influence, the most spectacular case being the assassination of the czar Alexander II in 1881, the liberal Tsar who had effected the emancipation of the serfs. Of course the act solved nothing, the old Czar was simply replaced by the new one, and the tradition could go on. Socialism was born as a political vision in the 19th century as a reaction to industrialization, it was systematized and radicalized as a philosophical-political entity under Marx, whose millennial views caught the imagination of intellectuals the world over. The idea of oppressed classes reacting and revolting under an oppressive rule is of course as old as history itself, and peasant uprisings can be traced far back (one notable example being the one Luther reacted against in the 16th century) and the primordial sentiment of indignation that inspires such revolts are universally acknowledged<sup>1</sup>. The growth of the Socialist movement, as testified

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<sup>1</sup> This is what lies behind the hysterical attachment to the second amendment of the US constitution,

through a series of Internationals, constituted a powerful means of politically organizing such up to now inchoate sentiments and supply them with a firm and sophisticated theoretical framework, which proved to be irresistible to intellectuals with political ambitions and social visions. The socialist movement would at the end of the 19th century split up into a more radical revolutionary branch and a more moderate, revisionist one which was happy to work within the emerging system of liberal parliamentarism that the revolution of 1848 had been instrumental in bringing about inspired by the British example. The latter branch was courted by the master politician Bismarck and his dealings with Lassalle resulted in the first welfare reforms in the world with the aim of nipping its momentum.

Russia was an autocratic regime and the more revolutionary outspoken Russian intelligentsia found it expedient to exile themselves to the more liberal West either voluntarily or through expulsion. Life in the West was softer and far more comfortable, and especially far more stimulating culturally than home. It was into this milieu young Trotsky found himself at the turn of the century dazzling everybody concerned with his wit, intellectual brilliance and verve, coupled with energy and passionate visions. And perhaps most relevantly a skilled orator. Those were qualities which made him stand out immediately attracting attention both of friends and enemies.

How did he get there? Leon Bronstein was born in a small obscure town in the Ukraine. He grew up in a wealthy, at least by local standards, Jewish family, with his father successfully running a plant employing local peasants. He was sent to school, first locally and then to Odessa, and proved himself to be an exceptionally good and gifted student, with a particular talent for mathematics<sup>2</sup>. In short he had the makings of an intellectual, and as such it was only natural that he would be drawn into circles where the state of society was discussed with passion. Deutscher suggests that his encounter with the workers of his father's plant would have awoken in him a social conscience, but I suspect that this was only incidental to his gaining of momentum and the direction into which it was guided. It was in this way he got in contact with Marxism, to which he was at first to take exception, but then gradually through study and reflection became more appreciative of. It is tempting to talk about a conversion as in a religious epiphany, but that would be, I think, misleading. His 'conversion' to Marxism was not so dogmatic as one would expect a religious one to be, he did not take it literally as a list of theses to be committed to, but as a perspective through which to analyze the problems of society. As a purely intellectual phenomenon, Marxism was clearly superior to other descriptions of society available at the time (and may be still is?) and as has usually been forgotten, the interests of Marx were wide-ranging going beyond that which is nowadays focused upon, and that would have no doubt appealed to Trotsky who likewise was omnivorous as to intellectual nourishment. Another figure of 19th century socialism was Ferdinand Lassalle, as mentioned above. His reputation suffered from his dealings with Bismarck, but nevertheless he served as inspiration to the young Trotsky. Those were heady times and the idea of a revolution,

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namely the right to arm yourself against a tyrannical government, a romantic notion combining a left wing call for the rise of the 'people' and a right wing call for rugged individualism, bespeaking a confusion among its adherents.

<sup>2</sup> a career he no doubt could have pursued with considerable success, at least as indicated by his teachers for what it is worth, but if so his rôle in 20th century history would have been very obscure

in particular a socialist revolution, was a very powerful and romantic idea, that could not help to sway the imagination of an impressionable youth filled with the zeal of idealism, as supposedly characterizes the more laudable aspects of raw youth. In other words for a reader intellectually inclined and also not entirely indifferent to an ambition to matter in history, an identification with the main protagonist has been set up; and clearly only such people would be attracted enough to become readers. But before we go on, we should ask some searching question, as how this movement differed from present day Islamic radicalism devoted by means fair and foul to overthrow the West and replace it by rule based on Islamic principles. There are many formal similarities that may reveal a common psychological basis, and besides an older generation of revolutionaries, had embraced the use of terrorism, but directed such, as noted, above.

That there is a common psychological basis ought not to be a controversial statement, after all we are talking about human beings whose psychological set ups, diverse and complicated as they may appear, nevertheless show striking similarities (as do human languages). As noted the idea of Revolution is a very romantic one appealing both to intellectual idealism and the need for practical action, which the case of the life of Trotsky illustrates beautifully. The fact that it had to be conducted clandestinely and underground, occasionally requiring more or less voluntary exiles abroad or compulsory internal prison exiles to Siberia added to the romanticism, especially as the forced exiles to Siberia appear as rather idyllic time-outs from the ongoing struggle, (at least compared to what the Soviet authorities later would mete out to their enemies imagined or not), during which they were given time to recuperate by studying and reflection. The 19th century seems to have been a rather civilized time. The difference between the terrorists of today and the social revolutionaries, was not so much in form as in substance. The form differed of course, the later generation of revolutionaries denounced the use of terror, but the real issue was the substance. The scope for intellectual development is rather limited in religion, especially in the modern activist version of Islam<sup>3</sup>, socialism grew out of a rich intellectual western tradition characterized by diversity, then it is another matter that like everything else it was amenable to reductive degeneration, taking on more and more the aspects of dogmatic religion, and this process can be well illustrated through the tragic career of Trotsky, whose life spanned the most dramatic years of Communism. Although Deutscher is very sympathetic to his subject, and was himself swept up in the revolutionary fervor in his youth, he presents no hagiography of the man, and even when he is not openly critical he is able to provide an objective standpoint that Trotsky himself would not have been able to do. An autobiographer has an obvious advantage to an outside biographer in having a privileged access to the inner life of the subject, a turf on which the latter cannot compete. Thus an autobiography can never supersede a successful biography when the latter chooses a different turf.

The early life of Trotsky, may have been of momentous importance to him, just as childhood looms over us all, no matter how insistent we have been to put it behind us, but from an objective point of view there is not so much to say. Trotsky married young

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<sup>3</sup> Theology is an intellectual tradition rather separate from worship, as Medieval scholasticism exemplifies, and it might be of some interest to learn that Stalin set out in a theological seminar in his native Georgia.

to a woman somewhat older than himself whom he met and belligerently argued with at underground meetings usually on the topic of Marxism to which she had been instrumental to alerting him. Her name was Alexandra Sokolovskaya. Once he reconciled himself to it he also reconciled himself to her and they married, not entirely out of convenience, and shared an exile to Siberia where he fathered a succession of children with her. However, she faded out of his life, or rather the narrative of his life, maybe because of pure distraction, and was left behind during his Western exile where he took up with another woman - Natalya Sedova; whether it resulted in a *menage a trois* or not I do not recall, but that certainly would be a piquant aspect of his life, a less serious biographer than Deutscher, may have pursued more relentlessly. In his autobiography Trotsky passes over the whole affair with hardly a sentence.

Trotsky was received with open arms (and some reservations) as already noted, when he arrived in London and met with Lenin for the first time. There was a striking contrast between them. Trotsky was flamboyant and an incredibly effective orator, something rather noteworthy in view of the fact that when he had started out to speak in public he had been hampered by shyness and floundered catastrophically, but had not given up but tutored himself without any worthy rôle model to emulate. In fact, Deutscher notes, he was even more effective as an orator than a writer because the rhetorical flourishes that tended to mar his writing enhanced his oratory. Lenin on the other hand came across as a dry organizer, with none of the flair of the young upstart. Trotsky was immediately taken up on the editorial board of *Iskra*<sup>4</sup> to which he regularly contributed. His quick ascension to such a prestigious position clearly provoked some discord and made him enemies. Soon after his arrival there was a Congress of Russian Social Democrats which resulted in the legendary split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Lenin had been adamant to remove some of the old faithful revolutionaries from *Iskra* and that caused bad blood and scandalized many old members who were joined by Trotsky, who thus would come to be associated with the Mensheviks and fall out with Lenin exchanging insults and referring mockingly to each other in print. This estrangement would last for more than fifteen years and cause a rift that seemed unsalvable; it would eventually heal and lead to a reconciliation as the concern for the party and the revolution trumped mere personal differences.

But Trotsky was far from having completed his *Bildungsreise* in the years to follow he would meet many more revolutionaries in Western Europe, Parvus being the most important influence, and he would travel to Germany and Austria, no doubt enjoying his education which was very focused on the coming revolution and allowing few if any sightseeing distractions. A few years later there was the debacle of the Russo-Japanese war which provoked a serious attempt of a revolution, but the Czar managed with a few concessions, such as setting up a kind of Parliament - the Duma - to avert it. One of the more lasting results was the setting up of Soviets giving the workers a voice and representations, an institution which would give the revolutionary movement a measure of legitimacy and play an important role in 1917. The events of 1905 called him back to Russia.

He could not move freely in the open, of course, but had to use a cover, in his case

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<sup>4</sup> Newspaper founded by Lenin in 1900 and abandoned by him a few years later in connection with the split up of the Russian Social Democratic party in 1903

the identity of a certain ensign Arbuzov. There was not too much he could do in the beginning, as the uprising came both too early and too late for the party. The split had made it impossible to act in unison, yet the split was not yet permanent there were still efforts of a reconciliation, which hampered action on both sides of the divide; yet soon enough he was busy agitating, but to no avail, except to establish himself further as a leader of revolutions. The Soviets, which had initially been so influential saw their momentum dissipating and eventually the whole attempt came to nothing. The Tsar could regain his power, dismissed the relatively liberal Witte as a prime-minister, and the old regime had weathered the storm, and Trotsky was taken to prison, which did not impede his reading and writing activities, and once again one is struck with the leniency the Tsarist regime treated their revolutionary opponents. Trotsky was now busy analyzing why the revolution had failed upholding the standard explanation that Russia was not yet ready for a proletarian revolution, and the bourgeois, unlike the case of France more than a century older constituted too thin a layer of the society. Anyway those months in prison was a rite of passage, through reading, thinking, and writing, his views matures and as Deutscher puts it, he was no longer a brilliant adolescent, but had reached manhood.

He was now facing a trial for insurrection, and luckily it turned out not to be a military tribunal which would try him. It was a public affair, and Trotsky conducted his defense with aplomb and showing off to the attended public, which included both his parents, who were quite proud of him. In the end Trotsky and his co-defendants were absolved from charges of insurrection but nevertheless sentences to Siberian banishment for life and loss of civil rights. A rather harsh verdict one may think, on the other hand escape was not uncommon as security was rather lax, a striking contrast to GULAG. The trip to their destination filled Trotsky with curiosity and appreciation of beauty, and he made his escape just before arriving, traveling in a sledge hauled by reindeer through a snowy landscape, with Trotsky taking copious notes of what he saw, and eventually hopping on a train at the Urals and arriving triumphantly in St-Petersburg, much to the astonishment of his wife Sedova.

The Revolution had failed and Tsardom got its revenge. As noted he fired the semi-liberal Witte and replaced him with Stolypin with an iron fist. Socialism which had been very fashionable shortly before now seemed to have lost its public allure, this was a severe setback, but Lenin and Trotsky would not give up but agreed that the underground clandestine organization of the party had to be revived. This was a first intimation that the rift that had sprung up between the two was healing, or at least fading in the background as much larger problems loomed. Otherwise the years up to the First World War made up for Trotsky a moratorium, he was deprived of a platform and achieved very little in a concrete way. He left Russia along with Lenin, via Finland (which was a rather autonomous region within Russia, but there were definite plans to integrate it more intimately) where they were received cordially as enemies of the Tsar. From there they went to London where the Russian Social Democrats had, what turned out to be their last unified congress, in fact with some 350 delegates almost ten times as many as back in 1903. From London he moved to Berlin where his friend and mentor of his early years in exile introduced him to the local notables, and then for the next seven years he settled in Vienna. Unlike most of the other revolutionaries Trotsky identified himself as a European and greatly enjoyed his exposure

to European culture learning the relevant languages and writing in them as well involving himself in local Socialist parties. In Vienna he lived a happy domestic life not above giving a helping hand in household chores. His wife, with artistic ambitions, introduced him to the treasures of art, to which he had initially been impervious, thus enlarging and intensifying his interest in ambient European culture, often taking time out from meetings and congresses to visit art museums, and even writing and publishing critical articles on it. Those idyllic years made him even more aware of the primitive state of Russia and added to the project of Socialism in Russia the transformation of Russia into a European country. As noted he did not achieve much politically during those years but he was very active as a journalist founding and editing but above all writing in a number of journals, among them the Viennese version of *Pravda*. As the years went on there became a final breach between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks and Trotsky was kicked out of the Central Committee of the party. In the meantime the oppression in Russia had lifted after the crack down following upon the failed revolution and socialist could now openly publish their journals, the Tsar was indulgent and the socialist movements revived and attracted a younger generation of adepts. While in Vienna he traveled to the Balkans, established contacts with the local socialists and attended and denounced a pan-Slavic congress headed by Miliukov, who would later play an important rôle in the Russian revolution now only a few years ahead. When the Balkan wars ensued he went there reporting on atrocities and engaged in a public controversy with Miliukov. It must all have been very exciting.

His happy life in Vienna came to a halt with the outbreak of the First World War as an enemy alien he had to leave and went first to neutral Switzerland the natural refuge for the Russian revolutionaries living in Austria and Germany. His stay was fairly short, only two months, the most notable thing accomplished was writing the pamphlet *The War and the International* putting down his thoughts on Socialism and War. The idea of a unified proletariat across international borders would of course make war obsolete. After Switzerland he continued to France and settled in Paris, once again active as a journalist, writing for *Kievan Thought* and *Golos* the latter (meaning the Voice) soon ceased publication and the newly started *Nashe Slovo* (Our Words) would see him as an editor alongside with Martov. In Paris he had a fall out with his old mentor Parvus, much to his regret (still being loyal to the memory of his once friend and writing that it was Parvus who had taught him to write plain thoughts in plain words). Parvus would drop out of the movement altogether. Then there was a big conference in Zimmerwald in Switzerland in which socialists from belligerent countries met, which by itself was considered a crime. Anyway Trotsky was able to return to France without having the documents from the congress in his luggage seized. His two year stint in France, however, came to a close, in 1916 *Nashe Slovo* was banned and he was expelled from France and entered Spain in the hope of getting to Italy and then back to Switzerland, but was arrested tipped by the French. Anyway he managed to go to the States and arrived in January 1917. His American sojourn would only last for two months and in March he learned of rumors of disturbances in Russia. On March 27 Trotsky, along with other emigres sailed on a Norwegian ship headed for Russia. But the trip was soon canceled, the ship was seized in Halifax Nova Scotia and British authorities arrested Trotsky and his fellow travelers heading them to a camp of German prisoners in Amherst, Massachusetts. There were

protests in Petrograd and even Miluikov, playing an important part in the early months of the revolution demanded his release, only to cancel it once he realized that he could expect nothing but enmity from Trotsky, yet he was later compelled to renew his demand. In late April Trotsky was released and arrived in Petrograd via Finland in the middle of May. Now the excitement could begin.

Trotsky was the last to appear on the scene, but he made up for it by immediately taking action. The situation was chaotic the usual infrastructure of a functioning society did no longer work. Long queues for bread, unrest, confusion and a government in disarray with various factions fighting each other. Lenin and Trotsky put their differences of the past aside, after all they had arrived at the same conclusions, if through different paths. Lenin paled besides Trotsky, but Deutscher considers that unfair, Lenin felt that he had to keep a low profile, while Trotsky could afford to be flamboyant and exuberant. Lenin was accused of treason by the revolutionary authorities, Trotsky defended him. Orders for arrests were given, Lenin went underground while Trotsky submitted to being thrown in prison trusting that he better could make his case to the public and disapproved of Lenins hiding. The prisons under the present regime was worse than during the time of the Tsar, for one thing they were overcrowded and due to the chaotic conditions political and petty criminals were mixed. Yet Trotsky continued to write and publish, making appeals to the authorities. In fact by a strange coincidence the Minister of Justice - Zarudny - had once been on the council of defense for Trotsky back in 1906. In August general Kornilov appointed Commander-in-chief by Kerensky turned against the government of the latter and had his troop march on Moscow. Kerensky and the Mensheviks appealed to the Bolsheviks to defend them and even made an appeal to the Kronstadt sailors to resist the general. The latter consulted with Trotsky whether they would attack both Kornilov and Kerensky, and Trotsky advised them to take on Kornilov first then there would be occasion to turn against Kerensky in due time. Soon thereafter Trotsky was freed on bail, and the troops of Kornilov deserted him without a shot being fired succumbing to Bolshevik agitation. This turn of event greatly strengthened the Bolshevik party. Now there was time to form a socialist government and pressure was put on the Socialist party and the Mensheviks to cut their ties with at least the Cadets who had supported Kornilov, yet the more moderate socialist parties tried to revive the coalition their members deserted them en masse. The influence of the Bolsheviks mounted inexorably, Kerenskys standing was questioned, had the rôle he had played in the Kornilov affair been ambiguous? His supporters abandoned him. At the end of September Trotsky was elected president of the Petrograd Soviet and by this time he was now acknowledged as a full-fledged leader of the Bolshevik party. The time for an insurrection was obviously imminent and Trotsky and Lenin argued about the best method. Both were convinced that revolution was in the air all over Europe and that the Russian one would just be in the vanguard of a more global insurrection. This was a mistaken assumption as events would reveal, but the conviction certainly provided a necessary boost and must be taken in account when judging further events. The difference was that Trotsky wanted to base the revolution on the Soviets thus giving it some constitutional grounds, while Lenin was more concerned with making it a purely party affair. However, it was a matter of tactics, Lenin was concerned as well about constitutional legality, but considered that to be a matter to be dealt with after the

insurrection, to involve the Soviets initially would only delay and complicate the take-over. However Kamenev and Zinoviev were opposed to the planned insurrection and thought of them both as suicidal adventurers about to plunge the party and revolution into sure destruction. There was a rift in the party: who was right and who was wrong? Strong arguments on both sides and only after the event can one say who was right and who was wrong, as in all gambles. In retrospect Lenin's and Trotsky's assessment of the lack of strength of the Kerensky government turned out to be right, but at the time it all seemed as a gamble, and had it failed, the prospects of a future revolution would have looked bleak indeed.

So how did it proceed? At the end of September Kerensky opened the pre-Parliament meant to be a substitute for an elected assembly. Should the Bolsheviks participate? Trotsky and Stalin argued for a boycott, Kamenev and others pleaded for participation, in fact a majority of Bolsheviks did so, in fact they had arrived from the countryside to participate in the preparliament. Lenin was not happy with that, he was also suspicious of Trotsky's attitude of linking an insurrection with the opening of the Congress of Soviets. Trotsky in the meantime was secretly planning a forthcoming insurrection hiding his moves behind a veil of innocence misleading not only outside observers but to a great extent Lenin himself. By the beginning of October the crisis had worsened. Setbacks on the front and German ships were patrolling the Gulf of Finland and threatening Petrograd causing preparations for an evacuation of governmental agencies to Moscow; the provision of the cities were failing and economic chaos was mounting. And out in the country peasants were seizing estates of the gentry and burning them down. Some people too weak to mount a counterrevolution now hoped that an invading German army would do it for them. Some of them going so far as to publicly announce their welcoming a reestablishment of law and order from the outside. On October 6 Trotsky addressed the soldiers section of the Soviet and proposed that if the provincial government be incapable of defending Petrograd it would either sue for peace or make room for another government. On the next day he addressed the preparliament on the dire dangers to Petrograd, the revolution and the people and announced the exodus of the Bolsheviks. Although opposed by a majority Lenin engineered a boycott. This was more or less a proclamation of a Civil War and both sides acted accordingly, Kerensky and his General Staff on one hand and Trotsky in cohorts with the Soviet on the other. Kerensky took measures to remove pro-Bolshevik troops from Petrograd ostensibly to strengthen the front, Trotsky argued that this would leave the capital undefended. As the government denied that they had plans to evacuate to Moscow, this only confirmed suspicions. On October 9 the Soviet was, Deutscher writes, in a state of agitation and resolutions were taken to take responsibility for the defense and setting up a Military Revolutionary Committee with Trotsky at its head with wide-ranging bureaucratic organization behind him thus setting up a vehicle for an insurrection. The next day there was a session headed by Lenin in which after a long debate a decision ten to two was taken in favor of a rising. To guide it on a day to day basis the first Politburo was elected consisting of Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Sokolnikov, Kamenev, Zinoviev and Bubnov; note the inclusion of Zinoviev and Kamenev. But those two opposed the decision for a call to arms appealing to the lower grades of the organization. Thus everything was once again in a flux, and the split Politburo was too ineffectual to offer any guidance.



Lenin left for his retreat in Finland but urged the party to take the responsibility for the insurrection although most of the leaders pushing for it preferred it to be conducted through the Soviets. Now Trotsky took to the helm, being the most active and organizing the armed take over. In mid-October a Congress was called, on October 16 the garrison in Petrograd decided to disobey the order of Kerensky to move, and to Trotsky this was the crucial step, from now on he was reassured that he would maintain the strength against Kerensky. He armed some 5000 red guards and event were drawing to its inevitable conclusion. The Central Committee met once again and Lenin (heavily disguised) had returned from Finland. His call for the party to act was overruled in favor of the Soviets, while Kamenev and Zinoviev were still opposed to armed action. A date for October 20 was set, this being the eve of the expected opening of the Congress. That left only a couple of days for preparation. Kamenev and Zinoviev did everything they could to frustrate the chain of events, even going to far as to publish a protest and denunciation of the plans in Gorky's newspaper, thus giving a warning to the outside world. Lenin was besides himself with indignation and called for the immediate expulsion of the two, a call which fell on deaf ears with Stalin trying to bring about a reconciliation, which was of course impossible. Either an insurrection or nothing. For Trotsky things went his way, in particular receiving the news that the Mensheviks had postponed the planned Congress for a few more days, giving him some more time for the final preparations, on the other hand the other side, alerted by Kamenev and Zinoviev could also profit from the delay. On October 18 Trotsky was confronted by two embarrassing questions, one concerning the plans for an insurrection the other of the arming of the red guards. He evaded the question masterly in a diplomatic sense, by misleading through true information. He assured everyone that the Soviets had not taken such actions, which was of course true, as he had done it on his own clandestinely, yet not gainsaying the illusion that he was working through the Soviets. Yet he needed to add some more half-truths to keep his options open and cover his back, admitting that he had after all ordered rifles for the Red guard, but that the Mensheviks were doing the same anyway, and that we all have to be prepared. Thus managing through his duplicity at the same time confuse his enemies while engaging his supporters. Surprisingly Kamenev and Zinoviev supported Trotsky confused by the complicated situation that had arisen and hoping to effect an abortion of the insurrection, be it in a round about way. This support confused and consoled the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries thinking that their support meant that Trotsky agreed with them. Shortly thereafter there was a meeting between Lenin and Trotsky where possible misunderstandings between the two were cleared and the later reassured the former of the success of the insurrection, which by now ought to unfold automatically, one thing leading to another. On October 21 Trotsky met with the regiments of the Petrograd garrison and made a special appeal to the Cossacks, traditionally loyal to the Tsar to stand by the coming revolution. The garrison put itself under the command of the Soviet convinced of an easy victory over Kerensky which would end the war. This of course was in conflict with the regular military command, but somehow something was worked out. On October 22 Trotsky held a monster meeting conducted in a very theatrical way including the appeal to the audience to give an oath as they readily did. The Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries thought of it as yet another of Trotsky's oratorical displays and did

not expect any real fire to ensue. Further planning went ahead and all what Trotsky now had to do was to wait for any kind of provocation from Kerensky which would give the whole insurrection an ostensibly defensive rôle. He was confident that Kerensky would do it, had he not provoked him to provoke? And Kerensky obliged on the 23rd of October by banning the newspaper *Rabochyi Put* under which name *Pravda* had appeared. This was a signal to action on the dawn the 24th a military contingent was sent to protect the printing-offices. An account of Kerensky's attempt to suppress the Bolsheviks and the Soviet was published. Now everything was imminent for the last blow and a final meeting of the Central Committee took place. Lenin and Zinoviev had not yet arrived from their hiding, Kamenev had resigned from the Committee and Stalin was unaccountably absent. Each member were given instructions and specific responsibilities. Meanwhile Kerensky addressed the pre-Parliament threatening to arrest Lenin and Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders. Trotsky took counter measures enlisting the support of the Kronstadt sailor, against whom Kerensky was going to move. Later on the Mensheviks called a meeting of the delegates assembled for the Congress where they were warned of bloodshed and that the counter revolution was only waiting for the Bolsheviks to riot and that would prove the end of the Revolution. They were also promised land reforms and the end of the war, what the Bolsheviks had always worked for. That was met with cries of 'Too late' from the floor. Now Trotsky was carried to the tribune and he made an impassioned speech for a insurrection and the divine rights of all downtrodden revolutionaries to make one. Yet he was vague enough for the Menshevik leadership to assume that the danger was not acute and to send an appeal to Kerensky not to undertake any repressive action, but the rising was already progressing. It all happened on the night of 24-25 October, much earlier than the opposition would have expected and took only a few hours, compared to the week that brought about the February revolution. Kerensky fled from the capital and his ministers were besieged at the Winter Palace while waiting for him. Without bloodshed the Bolsheviks had become master of the capital seizing key points.

Lenin had been the commander but Trotsky had carried it through on his own. So who was the real leader of the revolution, the one who had brought it about? Lenin acknowledged without offended vanity the spectacular achievements of Trotsky, and now they were both at the helm. On October 26 the Congress would open. The Bolsheviks would have a majority and through claiming that the Congress was the source of legitimate power the Revolution was a fact, the first act completed, and what now remained as a pressing problem was its consolidation. In the Congress Martov called for a boycott of the Bolshevik Central Committee and put in question the legitimacy of the whole operation, Trotsky answered in high flown language that the masses had spoken and that it was an insurrection and not a conspiracy, and dismissed Martov and his followers to the dust heap of history. The Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries called for a coalition government with the Bolsheviks but were rebuffed. A government was set up, but instead of consisting of ministers, the new terminology would be commissars. But the challenges that confronted it were huge. Their promise was to bring Peace, Land and Bread to the people, and that was a distant goal indeed. The whole economic infrastructure of the country was in complete disarray. As to the distribution of Land, the peasants had to a large extent taken care of that themselves, be it in a disorderly way and the government

only had to sanction it, at least provisionally. It was good for the peasants, but not for the production of bread, as a functioning system of larger agricultural units had now been split up into twenty-five million smallholdings. Thus a severe bread shortage followed. Similarly the functioning industries were broken up and the old authority removed without the government being able to install its own authority. Chaos descended. The situation was dire and the hope was that the Russian revolution would be followed by Revolutions in the West which would come to the assistance. But why, one wonders, would that work out? Would there not be chaos everywhere and the countries going through their revolutions would have little incentive to help the Russians and above all few resources to spare for the purpose. Apparently they put faith on the superior wealth of the West.

What we had now was a dictatorship of the masses as opposed to a dictatorship of the bourgeois and it entailed the propertied classes to be disfranchised but not necessarily deprived of freedom, in particular still entitled it freedom of expression, but what did it really mean? The Bolsheviks were convinced that they had the support of the absolute majority of the people giving their actions the necessary legitimacy; but in fact in contrast to the Revolution of February which was a real mass movement, that of the Bolshevik insurrection involved very few. Trotsky estimated it to at most 30'000 people. Yet the consensus was that many more people welcomed it with a friendly attitude and the Congress, where the Bolsheviks had a majority, represented 20 million electors, and about 10 million of them gave the votes to the Bolsheviks. But how to assess precise popular support? The rural population, constituting the mass of the people, was illiterate and had scant understanding of the internal quibbles which were exclusively urban. The industrial workers of Russia made up a very thin layer in society and could not, at least not in bulk, provide the basis that revolutionary theory required. There were dreamers and heroes, to which the leaders could relate and address, but the majority of Russians were an inert mass of slave mentality and laziness, the very reality of the situation, which the Bolsheviks much to their frustration could not ignore. In fact the Revolution was topped by an orgy of drunkenness. A orgy which lasted for weeks and threatened to completely paralyze society and with it bringing the Revolution itself to a screeching halt. In particular the disintegration spread to the army which would have dire consequences for pending peace negotiations with the Germans and Austrians. The auspices were far from encouraging.

Up to now the concerns of the revolutionaries had been almost exclusively agitorial, but now after power had been seized, this state of innocence would no longer be maintained. For one thing there were enemies both external and internal. On the front the German and Austrian armies pressed on and to quickly establish peace was of highest priority; in fact peace at all costs. But even more acute was the internal enemies bent on overthrowing the revolution. The actual seizure had been unbloody but soon Kerensky would make some attempts which had to be met by loyal troops in addition to the Red Guards which may have been good for insurrection but hardly for sustained warfare. The efforts by Kerensky was half-hearted, easily stymied, but Kerensky himself managed to escape and found sanctuary first in France, later on in the States, More serious were the White guards who did not even pretend to defend the February revolution but were intent upon reestablishing the Tsardome. Civil War would be inevitable.

In the new regime the Bolshevik took over the whole government. Lenin suggested

that Trotsky should lead it, he had after all led the insurrection, but he deferred to the seniority of Lenin. He was offered to become the Commissar of home security but declined, ostensibly because he was Jewish and he might invite anti-Semitic opposition, but really because the position did not appeal to him. But he would be given the command of the Red Army, not yet in existence, to put up resistance against the counter-revolutionaries and then to be the chief negotiator when it came to peace negotiations, where the Russian situation was very weak. However, the Bolsheviks believed, or desperately believed, that a global European revolution was imminent, and with that cessations of hostilities would be inevitable. The Bolshevik peace propaganda worried the entente from the beginning and they put pressure on the provisional government to outlaw the party, and went as far as declaring that Lenin and Trotsky were in the pay of the Germans. When the Bolsheviks came to power this avenue of action were closed to them and they were reduced to hope for the speedy overthrow. Thus the Bolsheviks were ignored by the Allied diplomats and even the staff of the Russian Foreign Ministry boycotted Trotsky in his new position as Foreign Minister. As a consequence there were arrests and then finally the documents, including secret treatises soon to be published, were handed over to the new power. Already on November 7 Dukhonin the former Chief of staff of Kerensky was ordered to immediately propose a cease fire to the Germans. The Allied powers were informed but they decided to ignore the proposals refusing to negotiate with the Bolsheviks, which they did not recognize as the legitimate rulers of Russia instead they turned to Dukhonin as the legitimate ruler. He was deposed and lately brutally murdered by a subordinate. The Bolsheviks pleaded with the Allied diplomats not to be left in the lurch as that would only strengthen the arm of the Germans. To no avail. On November 14 The German High Command consented to negotiations and Krylenko, the successor of Dukhonin ordered a ceasefire and encouraged fraternization between the troops in the hope that this would spread the revolutionary virus. On November 19 the delegations met and the Germans suggested a preliminary truce of a month while Trotsky rejected that and suggested a prolonging of the cease fire for another week hoping that the allied powers would start negotiations. He also instructed his delegation not to sign a truce with the Central Powers unless given a guarantee that they would not transfer troops to the Western front and a permission for the Soviets to conduct agitation among German and Austrian troops. As to be expected, the German Supreme Commander - General Hoffmann - rejected this and negotiations were on the verge of breaking down, but the Germans eventually conceded the first demand, excepting troops already on the move. Obviously they had no intention of honoring it. The bargaining position of the Soviets was very weak but they were playing for time hoping for a general uprising. In the meanwhile, although not formally recognized by the allied powers, some basic diplomatic channels were opened. But the Soviets were as of the present unfamiliar with the diplomatic game, and to a large extent the Russian professionals were not ready, at least not yet, to assist them, the Foreign Office had after all boycotted them. The negotiations at Brest Litovsk started in earnest on December 9 yet there was a further postponement, during which time there nevertheless were some preparatory work done, such as invalidating a Russo-British agreement on the partition of Persia, freeing prisoners of war and setting up a propaganda machine, and last but not least starting the demobilization of its army. Anyway the Allied powers refused to

join and the work resumed on December 27 with the arrival of Trotsky. Just before he had toured the front and to his despair discovered that the Russian trenches were empty. Arriving at the station a day or so later he had Socialist propaganda distributed among German soldiers, unable to fight with arms the only resource left was with arguments, criticism and propaganda, which he was set to exploit to the hilt. The setting at Brest was bleak indeed, the town razed to the ground by retreating Russian troops, leaving only the fortress intact used as German head quarters as well as the venue for talks. The whole set-up was meant to intimidate the Soviet negotiators, who, before the arrival of Trotsky, had been further put at a disadvantage and concomitant unease through condescending conviviality on the part of the hosts being wined and dined. Trotsky put an end to it all, no more hobnobbing they were after all dealing with enemies not friends. The German diplomat Khlmann opened by declaring that the principle of peace without annexation and indemnities only held for a general peace, not for a separate one, which clearly was now the case under consideration. He also rejected any request to move negotiations to some neutral spot, such as Stockholm. Trotsky listened carefully, taking the measure of his adversaries, and asked for a day's break. Khlmann was a master diplomat and understood what was at stake. It would be counterproductive to impose too harsh a condition on the Russians because that would make suing for peace less attractive to other belligerents. The military represented by Hoffmann was for a much tougher stand and thought of Khlmann as not much better than a traitor, yet he was still more reasonable than the German High Command led by Hindenburg and Ludendorff and had the sense to deflect the more extreme orders issued by the Kaiser (who was ready to break off negotiations period). The third main player Trotsky had to contend with was the Austrian Foreign Minister - Count Czernin. He was well aware of the precarious position Austria found itself in and thanks to the publication of secret clauses that Trotsky had published, not unaware of the plans for the dismemberment of the Austrian-Hungarian empire; thus his desire for peace was almost as bad as that of the Bolsheviks. In fact had it not been for the dependence on Germany Austria would not have been averse to concluding a separate peace with Russia. Also, alone among the negotiators who thought of the Bolsheviks as mere upstarts and adventurers, Czernin looked with respect on his adversary describing him as clever and very dangerous, exceptionally gifted and with a swiftness and adroitness in retort he had rarely encountered before. The others figured that they could easily be bought by small favors but should at first be put in place, one move being to make the Ukraine have its own delegation. On December 28, Trotsky addressed the meeting for the first time. So far he had shown his mettle as an agitator, preaching either to the choir and an receptive audience or engaging his fellow revolutionaries in discussion, and also not to forget his spirited defense back in 1905. Now his skill as a debater had to be tested on a new arena, namely that of international diplomacy of which he had little if any experience. But his verbal skills and his flair for propaganda stood him in good stead. He skillfully avoided the trap set for him and declared that the Russians had no problems with the Ukrainians doing their own negotiations and refused to be led into a fight with them. He neither had any desire to apologize for the Soviet propaganda he had come here to discuss peace terms nor to limit his country's freedom of speech, and he had issued no protest against the counterrevolutionary propaganda the Germans had seen fit to spread among Russian

citizens. He renewed his protest against the peace conference taking place in Brest and insisted that the negotiations should be held in public, well knowing that this would work to his advantage. His temperament was that of a performer who loved to act on a stage before a large public.

Two days later a German draft for a peace treaty was discussed. Trotsky raised an objection against a clause in the preamble about the contracting parties desired to live in peace and friendship. It was, he claimed, merely a conventional cliché signifying nothing and at odds with the dry business-like tenor of the document. The opposing party were puzzled by such a minor point, but in the end Trotsky got his way. Then followed a far more serious and dramatic discussion between Khlmann and Trotsky on the interpretations of self-determination. Khlmann was desirous of dressing up the annexation of Poland and the Baltic States as self-determination, but Trotsky refused. Both parties argued the case with skill and subtle logic, but Trotsky prevailed in the end due to his sardonic approach and superior wit getting the delegates quiver with suppressed laughter, with the exception of a growling Hoffmann. The discussion became more abstract and Trotsky switched from Russian to German. At the end, when pressed, he made a point of difference between a nation created by a force from within or from having an external will imposed on it. And the drama continued in the same vein. Against Khlmann Trotsky's arguments and rhetoric had limited success as the confrontation was lifted to too high a level of subtlety to engage a larger audience, however, when Hoffmann entered the fray in his soldierly bluntness, Trotsky was more than happy to take advantage of his slugging.

On January 5 Trotsky asked for a break in the conference in order to acquaint his government with the details of the German demands. The situation was of course still very precarious, the Russians had no military power to back their demands, but yet there were some hopeful indication that his performance at the conference table had made some impression on an international public. On his return the Assembly had been dispersed thus consolidating the power of the Bolsheviks and the October Revolution placing the latter as the sole source of legitimacy of the regime. The party was split on the issue of peace. Lenin, desperate for peace was all for accepting the German terms while Trotsky rejected peace but did not favor war either; on the other hand a majority led by Bukharin and supported by the Social revolutionaries was for a war to promote socialism, and thus could be seen as the radical left wing. However, that majority was weak and somewhat confused, their opposition to the peace being stronger than their support for a war, which in the view of the circumstances would hardly have been realistic. Trotsky returned to Brest in the middle of January 1918 decided to play for time, but had a secret understanding with Lenin that he would accept peace terms would the Germans resume hostilities. In Germany and Austria peace protests had been suppressed and thus the opponents were fortified with a new self-confidence. There were haggings over the status of Poland and the Ukraine, where the Bolsheviks were making inroads, but nothing came out of it and at the end of the month Trotsky broke off negotiations, confident that his policy of non-resolution would carry the day, thus being guilty of an unwarranted optimism. Soon thereafter (February 17) the Germans invaded and met no resistance whatsoever and in early March the party had to sue for peace on conditions much harsher than those originally proposed. Russia had to cede the Baltic States and Finland, where a Civil War raged and in which the

White would win and Finland would become for the first time ever a country of its own. Furthermore former Polish territory had to be given up and in addition parts of Belarus as would the whole of the Ukraine, however, the Bolsheviks would be on the verge of retaking control. Trotsky had all along dithered between war and peace but at crucial moments given his support to Lenin. The expulsion of Lenin from the leadership had been close, which might have fatally split the party. Lenin's rationale for peace at any price was to give the regime respite, retreat and to lick its wounds and rebuild, taking historical encouragement from the Prussian recovery from Napoleon's onslaught. Trotsky had little to show for his efforts having misjudged the situation.

The Revolution now faced its survival. There was an armed opposition, whose initial attacks had been repulsed but which was getting stronger and better organized drawing on the army. On top of that there was a Polish invasion led by Pilsudski and the threat of foreign intervention. Trotsky was put in charge as a Commissar of War to organize armed resistance. The challenge he now faced was of a completely different nature than what he had ever faced before. Out of nothing he had to fashion a strong army, to be called the Red as opposed to the White led by the White Guards. This required great organizational skills, a pragmatic attitude going beyond ideological agitation, and of course ruthlessness. If Trotsky up to now had had no blood on his hands this could no longer be the case. The Tsarist army was in disarray and for all intents and purposes vanished and thus could be of no help, and the Red Guards were as of yet too few to make much difference and besides disorganized and badly trained. Yet in the end he managed after two and a half years the Red Army counted five millions. The dilemma was that the revolution had fostered an attitude of revolt and seeing in the army an enemy; now the challenge was to reverse those attitudes and extol the military and to submit to its order. This of course was a challenge to his liking drawing on all his resources of persuasion and propaganda. On the other hand ideology could not be allowed to intervene in any practical matter. Warfare is not a science, but based on science (one may incidentally make the same claim for medicine). It is a practical art, and as such savage and bloody. And importantly one cannot base military doctrine on Marxism (the brilliant commander Tukhachevsky heading the Polish campaign, was inspired by Napoleon not by Marx) that would be like having architecture based on veterinary science, according to Trotsky; thus he had no qualms enlisting professionals, meaning tsarist officers. Without a significant defection of officers from the old army, the task facing Trotsky would have been impossible. Also prolonged fighting is a learning experience, just as any kind of activity benefits from sustained practice. And war is savage, and Trotsky did not shy away from that. In a Civil War execution is the only effective deterrent, as soldiers engaged in internal disputes, defection to the other side is a far easier option than when facing an external enemy. In the end the Revolution survived against all the odds, including the most significant one namely the absence of a global revolution on which the revolutionaries had counted. True there had been some attempts, notably in Germany and Hungary, but those had been short-lived. So why did they succeed? One element was luck of course, it probably could have gone the other way, on the other hand why luck would be a factor at all requires some explanation, the Bolsheviks were not after all a negligible force, how had that been accomplished?. For one thing its support was stronger than its enemies might have been

willing to acknowledge. Furthermore Russia was a vast and primitive country requiring resources for occupation something the foreign expeditionary forces did not possess and which their governments were neither motivated nor able to supply. A similar situation faced the Whites drawn upon by but a rather thin section of the population. Initially they had the advantage but that was gradually dissipated. In short the level of commitment on the parts of the Whites did not match that of the Bolsheviks who for one thing were fighting for their lives. The organizational talents of Trotsky were considerable, as was his passion for agitation and bolstering morale, and also, not to forget his ruthlessness, as Lenin noted: A Revolution is not a tea party. Yet Trotsky never lost his identity as an intellectual publishing literary criticism through the heat of the war<sup>5</sup>. The price paid by the Russian Bolshevik Revolution was enacted by the Civil War, both directly in terms of blood spilled and devastation to the fabric of society and the ensuing brutalization of the regime, to which Trotsky contributed significantly. One may of course argue that the opposing sides should shoulder their share and quite likely would have brought about their own terror. Yet Finland would be a counterexample where the victory of the Whites did bring on a democratic society and also Hungary where the Bolsheviks were defeated.

If the actual February Revolution and the ensuing Bolshevik coup provided the preamble, the first Act was the Civil War that led to the second Act that of reconstruction. The War had led to devastation and the destruction of industry and agriculture. As to the industry, industrialization of the country had taken on momentum already during the pre-revolutionary period ushering the country into the Modern Age, if gently and gingerly; while agriculture remained the predominant feature of society. It was primitive but therein was its resiliency. During Civil War Communism was actually introduced, at least the War version, whose implementation becomes almost automatic, also to some extent in capitalist countries. The War Communism in this case was especially stringent, and involved nationalization of industries, forbidding private trading, excessive printing of money and the concomitant inflation which ultimately reduced the economy to barter, as money no longer carried the necessary trust to function. In a sense the ultimate goals of the revolution had been achieved, namely the destruction of a free-market undercutting capitalism. But War Communism was a travesty of Marx vision which envisioned universal wealth caused by a rational production as opposed to the fitful way that was achieved through Capitalism. Now there was an equality of wealth brought about but by making poverty universal. The normal healthy markets had disappeared but been replaced by black ones. An economical catastrophe.

To Lenin, but above all to Trotsky, the solution to the economic problem was easy, just as soldiers could be commanded to fight they should also be commanded to produce. What was more normal to a military commander? In the Urals there were a lot of idle former soldiers but they could not be brought home due to a lack of available transport. What could be controversial about putting them to work? Both Lenin and Trotsky met with strong opposition, maybe not as logical but on the other hand more realistic. Trotsky's imagination was out of joint with reality, trying to organize a militia of labor, going so far as to systematically introducing military terminology, later to be ossified. The fact

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<sup>5</sup> This was once relayed to me with admiration by my late Bulgarian colleague Vasil Tsanov, in spite of his very vocal anti-communism.



was that there was a huge gap between people and the rulers, just as in the time of the Tsar (did not Nicholas II entertain naive and romantic ideas about a mystical link between himself and the people, just as revolutionaries were apt to romanticize the proletariat as a font of wisdom to be properly interpreted to guide as well as being guided by?). One anecdote, supplies by Deutscher, may suffice. After having written a glowing appeal while in his customary train transit, the train derailed in a snowstorm causing Trotsky suffer a concussion. Throughout the night and the following day the train was stuck in a snowdrift without anyone to inquire and notice, let alone act, although the accident occurred almost within eye-sight of a small station. The infra-structure, including elementary routines, simply did not work. Trotsky fired by passionate energy had to contend with a fathomless apathy of the people he was set to serve and lead. This made him rethink his basic policies and come to the conclusion that at least a certain measure of economic freedom had to be returned to the peasants. In particular he realized that the policy of requisition among peasants may have been counterproductive and had to be stopped. Those revisionist ideas turned out to be a forerunner of the N.E.P (New Economic Policy). Lenin hailed them. Yet compulsion of labor was of course unthinkable in a fully fledged socialism but it was necessary during the period of transition. Furthermore Trotsky advocated incentive wages for the efficient workers, and looked upon Taylorism and American conception of scientific management as commendable and rational, unfortunately abused by Capitalism but Socialism would surely put it to its full rational use. As to trade unions he thought that their purpose was to discipline workers and teach them to put the interest of production above their own petty personal needs and demands. This *volte en face* naturally startled people. He was subjected to harsh criticism by the Mensheviks, claiming that you could not build a planned economy in the way the Pharaohs built pyramids. For all their odious record during the revolution their arguments were logical and sound and Trotsky could but agree in his heart; he chose though to respond with a piece of brilliant sophistry, claiming that all work is ultimately compulsory as in order not to die from starvation you cannot shirk work. In fact this rebel *par excellence* came very close to becoming an apologist for past system of coercion and exploitation. Trotsky was becoming too extreme threatening to shake up the trade unions and replace their leaders with those who would take the national economic interest above the sectional interests of the workers. Lenin took exception to him and urged the Central Committee to do the same. In fact, although Trotsky remained on it, he was surrounded by opponents and were henceforth forbidden to speak publicly on the relationship between the trade unions and the state. But he continued to be a champion of management and an efficient bureaucracy, which he saw as apolitical and part of the general improvement of mankind. The opposition to the Bolsheviks by the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries was intense and in a democratic setting the Bolsheviks no doubt would have been voted out of power. But of course having been deprived of power would only spark a new Civil War. There was a revolt at Kronstadt which Trotsky now suppressed the mutiny by brute force. Things had gone full circle. Of course many of the ideas Trotsky proposed as well as his brutal measures would later be adopted by Stalin in spite of his initial opposition, and then with unprecedented brutality. Trotsky was in many ways a genius, head and shoulder above the other revolutionaries, when it came to pure logic, swiftness of thought and verbal resourcefulness, imagination

and lust for experiment; but it all got the better of his political sense, he was too much of an intellectual, and he eventually had to bow to lesser and less flamboyant men, which often is for the good, but not always.

In the end new economical policies won the day and NEP was introduced. But economic freedom did not automatically result in political freedom. The latter had been suppressed during the Civil War, but it had been the intention of Lenin and Trotsky, at least according to the latter, to lift the ban against the opposition once the economic and social conditions had stabilized. In reality, however, the economic surge connected to the new policies, made the Bolshevik party less confident of their power. We may have two parties, the saying went, attributed to Bukharin, but one should be in office, the other in prison. And also within the party, which initially had welcome discussion and dissent, suppression of opposition became more and more imperative as it had to face the momentous task of governing the vast primitive country. Trotsky had become more and more marginalized, his finest hour having been the insurrection and the creation of the Red Army riding out the most acute threats to the survival of the Revolution.

November 1-6, 11-12, 14-17, 2020 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se