

## My Life

### *An Attempt at an Autobiography*

*L. Trotsky*

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While expelled to Turkey Trotsky was induced to write his autobiography, something he might never have been moved to do, had the circumstances been different. He had his qualms about the project, after all what was of interest in his life was the impersonal struggle, not his own living of it, but the opportunity to settle accounts with his enemies might have been too tempting to pass up, yet there is not that much of that, and what there is appears as rather fair. He was writer by temperament and unchecked habit, so he cannot but be intrigued by the challenge, even if he professes a certain bad conscience for putting himself in focus.

So he starts his attempt of remembering and recollecting from the very beginning claiming that he recalls suckling the breast of his mother adding some other primitive memories of whose genuineness he is not entirely sure. But from the age of three and four he gets into stride. His childhood was not happy, he pronounces in first paragraph, only children of the very well-to-do can look back upon a rosy childhood spent in comfort and free of worries. Neither was his childhood a misery, that is the lot of the majority living in destitution on the verge of starvation. His childhood was gray, being brought up in a lower middle class family of Jewish origin. His father worked successfully as a farmer with lots of agricultural workers under him, slowly acquiring capital and expanding his business. Life was frugal, nothing should be wasted, and it was paying off.

Trotsky makes a point of the year 1885. It was the first year associated to a number which he came across, and with that he became aware of a general chronology, which had a momentous impact on him. I too, roughly at the same age, came across the year 1956, which likewise excited me a lot as it opened to me, as it must have opened to Trotsky, human history, especially European with its centuries loaded with meaning. In both cases a common mathematical congeniality must have come into play. He was soon taught to read and that naturally had a strong effect on him, more visibly obvious than the first; although there was not so much to read at home.

He got some elementary schooling but that was clearly not enough. A young relative of his mother took him under his wing and brought him to Odessa to live with him and his bride – a school principal. This gave him the first touch of intellectual company. The issue of further schooling gave him the options of either the Gymnasium or the Realschule. Both had quotas on Jews. While the Gymnasium was the most prestigious, offering a classical education with a focus on Latin, the Realschule was more modern and geared towards the sciences, which appealed to his father, who had something practical in mind for his son, such as engineering. The young Trotsky turned out to be a star student, a quick study of a diligent and highly disciplined nature, soon becoming the favorite of his teachers, easily being first in class with quite a gap in between to the runner-ups. His favorite subject

was mathematics. He might not have got along too well with his class-mates, excellent students seldom do, their achievement not being of the kind that inspires admiration and concomitant emulation. But he was not an outcast, and he took an active part in a prank that led to his temporary expulsion from the school. His teachers had at first not suspected him of any participation, but fellow students had ratted on him, yet due to his scholarly prestige he was given the lightest of punishments<sup>1</sup>.

Trotsky as a school-boy had been entirely apolitical, as was his family, but revolutionary tracts started to interest and intrigue him and he was for the first time introduced to Marx, what had primarily a psychological effect on him, intellectually he initially was skeptical. He joined study groups and after his graduation he wavered between pursuing his newly awoken political interest or to pursue pure mathematics academically. As we all know, he chose the former. At first his interests and involvement was purely theoretical but the romantic idea of a revolution motivated them, but between talk and action there was a huge gulf. The solution was to get in touch with workers. There were not many workers in Russia, but it was fairly rapidly being industrialized with new plants being constructed, even in the small town of Nesterenko, where Trotsky was active at the time and where he also had studied during his last year. The workers at that time were more of skilled artisans than exploited proletarians, highly skilled and well educated, and as a consequence relatively well-paid. This did not detract from their revolutionary ardor, rather the other way around, so this facilitated contacts being mutually rewarding from an intellectual point of view<sup>2</sup>.

But once workers got involved the activity was transformed from mere innocent study to active insurgency. In the small town the police was not used to such work of surveillance, thus the incipient revolutionaries were gaining time, but not indefinitely. The authorities were catching on and spies were dispatched to infiltrate, adding to the external dangers internal subversive ones which needed to be seen through, which was not so easy. Eventually at the age of nineteen Trotsky was arrested and sent to prison in order to await sentencing. He complains in his text on the conditions, the cells were big but cold in winter, and for three months he had no change of underwear. Imagine Stalinist prisoner complaining about that. The objectively worst thing was isolation, but when moved to a more permanent place in Odessa, communication between prisoners became possible given some ingenuity; and above all it was possible to read and make notes. Trotsky availed

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<sup>1</sup> The problem had a cause. One teacher, by name of Gamow, had been too lazy to look at, grade and return assignments he had given, which led to protests, which Trotsky seconded. Eventually it lead to a prankish demonstration.

<sup>2</sup> One of the workers, a certain Mukhin, an engineer, used as a pedagogical device a pile of navy beans. One of them was put in the middle of a table, representing the tsar, around him he placed other beans representing bishops, ministers, high officials, and then on the side the large remainder of the beans were to represent the rest. Identify the bean which is that of the tsar, he asked his audience. That was no difficulty, neither with the other high officials placed around him. Then he scrambled them altogether and asked the same question. But now it was obviously impossible, the moral being that the identity of the tsar was not intrinsic to his person, but a consequence of the way society was structured. The point of a revolution was to scramble everything together, but how that would be accomplished, was the difficult question.

himself of the opportunities present by engaging himself in a study of freemasonry, being intrigued by this phenomenon of medieval retrieval and what relation it had to Social affairs and Marxism, which he gradually was coming to terms with in his self-study. He learned a lot and filled a thick notebook with notes in a tiny script. He managed to get it out of prison but it was subsequently lost in storage, most likely used as fire feed by the Swiss landlady to whom it had been entrusted during a later exile. Trotsky was still seething at the time of writing thirty years later. It was also in prison he for the first time learned about Lenin.

He was sentenced to Siberian exile sent by barge along with many other fellow prisoners, to be dropped off along its shores. One of the fellow prisoners was Aleksandra Lvovna Sokolovskaya, an old comrade. Desiring not to be separated during exile they decided to marry. Out of this union based more on friendship than romanticism, two daughters were born. Exile was hard, but of course compared to Stalinist camps, paradise. Life was rather free and the dangers of boredom and despondency could be met with hard intellectual labor, into which Trotsky threw himself with abandon. It was during this exile he became a writer in earnest, although he had of course already shown definite talent for such endeavors. He contributed regularly to an exile journal, and saw with satisfaction how his pay rose from two kopecks to four per line. But life was provincial and he was separated from the real revolutionary action and decided, by the wholehearted support of his wife, to escape. This certainly was not trivial, but more to the point it was not impossible. The only dramatic parts of the escape happened in the beginning and at the end. To get to the train station at Verkholensk was the first hurdle, it was accomplished hiding together with a fellow female revolutionary in a cart. The train ride was rather prosaic spending days and nights on the train with a Russian translation of the Iliad and with a passport under the name of 'Trotsky' a name he had just hurriedly thought up, having no presentiment that it would stick to him ever since. He made a stop in the Ukraine meeting with other revolutionaries who sent him on towards the Austrian border to be guided over by a young Revolutionary Socialist with whom he got into a political argument and who almost aborted his assignment in the heat of the quarrel. Low on funds he could only make it to Vienna where he prevailed upon Viktor Adler to send him further to Zürich where he had an appointment with Axelrod. This worked out, even if he had to bother Adler on a Sunday. Trotsky does not dwell on his important meeting in the Swiss City, but from here he went to London to meet Lenin and his wife. He was well received, but Lenin took him on a sight-seeing tour in the city in order to test him. He passed the test with flying colors and felt no interest in the City at all, preoccupied as he was with his revolutionary struggle and the theoretical problems associated with it. What was London to him? Lenin was sufficiently impressed with him to strongly recommend him as the seventh editor of the journal *Iskra*(Искра). The old revolutionary Plekhanov took exception to it, seeing it as a ruse by Lenin to obtain a majority of the younger men (Lenin, Martov and Potresov) against the old guard (Plekhanov, Axelrod and Vera Zaslitch), and from then on resented Trotsky as a mere upstart. In the meantime Trotsky had moved to Paris, which left him as indifferent as he had been to London and other cities of the West; and significantly taken up by a young woman Sedova, who would become his second wife, and soon bear him a son. He had arrived on the scene when there was a split forming in the Social

Democratic party and Trotsky was aghast at the callous behavior of Lenin casting aside the old faithful revolutionaries, and relations between the two cooled considerably. This was the famous split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, with Martov leading the minority wing. Trotsky joined neither preferring to keep his independence. He notes that the actions of Lenin were indeed callous, but that in retrospect politically necessary. The split with Lenin was also good, because when they later on were reunited at the Eve of the 1917 fall insurrection, he did it on his own conditions. He had noted that Lenin's men were mere acolytes, and helpless when deprived of their master and left to their own resources.

The rumblings of the 1905 made Trotsky leave immediately for Russia and was to play an important part in the newly formed Soviets. By now he had come to his own, his theoretical education was completed, and now events put him to the practical test, convincing him that he had the necessary intuition to be able to make the right decisions on his feet, noting with a mixture of surprise and gratification, that his slightly older rivals, such as Martov, became very confused when challenged. The Bolsheviks, being deprived of their leader as the arrival of Lenin on the scene was delayed, bumbled as well. Trotsky was no longer a student, he had come to his own. To educate himself he would continue throughout his life, but now as a master having to submit to no authority except his own. Of course the will of the Proletariat was something different, but that was not a fallible individual but a kind of deity, whose wishes had to be divined. In his analysis of the events, which eventually fizzled out, he refers to it as a dress-rehearsal of October 1917. He takes some satisfaction in how incapably Witte had interpreted the revolts. To him the battle cry of Land to the Peasants' was the important message, not 'All Powers to the Soviets', which he had dismissed as a marginal side-show. But Witte died in 1915 and was never confronted with the October Revolution.

The revolutionary adventures of Trotsky ended up in an arrest and subsequent imprisonment which he actually welcomed. The conditions of the prison were far superior to those he had experienced as a teenager, and he was in fact given ideal circumstances for undisturbed working and studying, catching up on his literary education. In fact he confesses that although his German was better than his French, he found French easier to read. He regrets that he had no aptitude for language, while in London his English left him in the lurch. The brief imprisonment was concluded by a much publicized trial to which his parents had been moved to attend. He conducted himself with aplomb, well knowing the political potential of the event. He was sentenced to indefinite Siberian exile north of the Arctic circle but being spared hard labor, which however would be the consequences of any attempts at escape. He never made it to his final destination - Otdorsk - but managed in transit to escape by hiring an Ostyak who took him along the river Sosva in a sledge driven through the snowy wastes by a troika of reindeer<sup>3</sup>. After a rather quick journey of some 700 km taking a week, he was able to take a train and cabling his wife to meet him along the route. It worked, and after a brief sojourn in Finland, temporarily joining up with Lenin and Martov, he was off. It is hard not to compare his treatment with that the Soviet regime later would mete out to its enemies, imagined or not.

Trotsky was generally disappointed in the Marxists he met in Austria and Germany

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<sup>3</sup> The translator has for some reason translated it into 'deer'

with the notable exceptions of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. He found them quite erudite but lacking in the true revolutionary spirit. For them it was just an intellectual exercise, admittedly of great interest but not something that really had a connection to reality. They may be in the know, but Marxism had not really penetrated their thinking, had not become something that had really changed their living and understanding in any deeper sense. It was something seen from the outside, not something to be lived in. They spoke with self-satisfaction not self-assurance. In fact he suspected them of being philistines at heart. They simple were unable to apply Marxists principles to solve political problems that arose, as opposed to write articles on Marxism, which they could do very well. They knew things by heart, not through heart. Trotsky ended up feeling very alien to the Social Democrats of both Germany and Austria. He found solace in reading the correspondence between Marx and Engels which confirmed him not only in theoretical issues but also psychological and personal, discovering that he shared their sympathies, their antipathies, their sense of humor, in short their attitude to life as a whole.

He discusses many old comrades, such as Kautsky known for proposing an *Ermatungsstrategie* as opposed to a *Niederwerfungsstrategie*, but the problem was that it would be rather the revolutionary idealism of the masses which would be worn out not bourgeois society. Or Bebel the old leader of the German Social Democrats who did not get a worthy successor in Haas whom he had favored. Once again an idealist but too narrow in his scope. As already noted Liebknecht and Luxemburg were the only ones who gained his respect and approval.

He spent eight years in Vienna, with frequent visits to Berlin and serving some time as a war correspondent to the Balkans for the *Kievskaya Mysl* in 1912. He was aghast at the reality of the war when no longer an abstraction and reported on the Slavic atrocities committed against the Turks. He got to know the Balkan scene and some interesting people (invariably revolutionaries) such as the Romanian Dobrudjanu-Ghera, and as he writes, cementing his friendship with the Bulgarian Rakovsky. His activities were focused on preparing for a second attempt at a Revolution in Russia and he made a living, modest but sufficient, on his journalism. Unlike his first exposure to the West he now found time to appreciate the cultural offerings of the big capitals. His children were fluent in Russian and German and would quickly pick up French when the occasion would occur, but his own command of foreign languages, except reading, were to his regret modest. Politically the pre-war years were dominated by the schisms among the Socialists and a possible reconciliation between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, was the issue of contention. Formally he belonged to neither, but his sympathies would more and more gravitate towards the Bolsheviks, especially as old friends such as Axelrod and Martov broke with him bitterly, whose hatred directed against him he found it impossible to reciprocate, they having meant so much to him in the past.

Germany declared war on Russia on August 1, 1914. Russians had started to leave already before that. Trotsky and his family were late not prone to ancky action, but when making official inquiries they were told to leave right away and within hours they had already packed and were on the train bound for Zürich. They stayed in Switzerland for couple of months and on November 19 he crossed into France as a war correspondent for the Kiev paper. Paris was deserted, the streets pitch black and occasionally a Zeppelin flew

over. As we all know the Germans did not make it all the way but were checked at Marne and the war stalled and settled into one of sustained attrition. At the outset both camps had been convinced that it would be an affair of short duration, which explained the rush of popular support, even among the Socialists supposedly committed to internationalism. But they thought of the war as a mere episode which would have beneficial aspects. Trotsky's family came to France in May and they settled in Sèvres. Among the people he socialized with was Martov the leader of the Mensheviks and not yet an enemy. He gives a short characterization of the man, whom he thought of as one of the most talented men he had ever come across. But, as he puts it, his rich and pliant intelligence lacked the support of a will. As he himself put it, he could not gather his thoughts together. When he would encounter real events he was at a loss, bewildered by all the contradictory possibilities and inhibited by doubts. Clearly what was missing was the inner conviction and the iron-will, something Trotsky did not lack. Otherwise the great event was the conference in the small Swiss village of Zimmerwald. It was a stormy one, in which Lenin was in a minority of the extreme left, maybe even in a minority of one. A manifesto against the war, which Trotsky had helped to draft, collected the pacifists, which in fact constituted a minority as well. The manifesto was not strong enough, according to Trotsky, much more could have been said, but it served as a useful first step and encouraged a pacifist front among the left Socialists. Anyway, according to Trotsky, Lenin managed to lay the corner stone of the revolutionary International, whatever is meant by that.

Then Trotsky was expelled to Spain, taken on a train from Paris across the border at Irun, and then made for Madrid. He spent a few days in the capital before being apprehended by the Spanish police, who had already been forewarned by the French authorities. He was taken to Cadiz in order to be put on a ship to Havana. He was aghast, what was he to do in Havana, and he protested with success. Instead he would be put on the next available ship to New York, which necessitated a wait, which he as usual exploited to the hilt, teaching himself Spanish. He then left with his family from Barcelona on Christmas Day of 1916 and arrived after two weeks on a rough sea to New York.

New York, if anything, symbolized capitalism to him, thus he was intrigued and fascinated by city, in fact very much impressed by it as, as he writes, the fullest expression of the modern age to be found anywhere. It had already started to build its skyscrapers giving to the street scenes its characteristic cubist touch. To people at the time, and for decades ahead, it was something of a science-fiction city, maybe more fictional than real. Trotsky's presence in the city was noted in the press and he was given the one profession more exotic than the other, and, he notes, had they been collected in a book, they would have provided a far more interesting autobiography than the one he was writing. He and his family rented a modest apartment in a working-class district (as to have been expected) yet with amenities unknown in Europe, and which delighted the boys in the family. He made a living as a journalist, there being Russian newspapers, such as *Novy Mir*, in the city, and thus a large Russian contingent residing<sup>4</sup> and he even went on lecture tours speaking in Russian and German, his English at the time being very poor. In New

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<sup>4</sup> In fact the paper was founded in 1916 by Social Democratic emigrants in New York and edited by Bukharin and Alexandra Kollontay (1872-1952), but after the February Revolution of 1917 most of them returned to Russia and the paper was discontinued to be revived again in Moscow in 1925 as a literary

York he encountered Bukharin, whom he had known from his Vienna period, and who had recently escaped via Scandinavia to New York. He met him with characteristic childish exuberance, he remarks dryly, and took him right away to the Public Library. Bukharin, Trotsky notes, has always the need to attach himself to someone, so you have to constantly keep an eye on him lest he gets under the influence of somebody else. The other editor of the New World journal - Alexandra Kollontay, he had very little to do with as she traveled a lot. Her knowledge of languages made her a useful agitator. Politically she had swung from the ranks of the Mensheviks to the extreme left of the Bolsheviks, and during her New York period, nothing was radical enough for her. Her theoretical views were always very confused. Later on she would take an anti-Trotsky stand and would become a loyal Stalinist<sup>5</sup>.

Trotsky's sojourn in New York came to be brief, the news of the February revolution made him restless and he was able to secure a berth for him and his family on a Norwegian boat at the end of March. All the papers were in order for a return to Russia. However at Halifax on Nova Scotia, the boat was inspected by British Naval authorities and the Russians were subjected to cross examination and Trotsky was ordered to disembark along with his family to be subjected to further examinations which resulted in Trotsky being removed to a camp of German prisoners in Amherst, Massachusetts. Very frustrating. The conditions were harsh with five prisoners going insane, and Trotsky complains about having to have them around. As usual he did not waste his time and he lectured to his fellow inmates (of which there were some eight hundred) about the Russian Revolution, of Lenin and Liebknecht, turning his internment into a continuous mass-meeting. A request for his release had been relayed to Muilikov, who at first had assented, then regretted and in the end he had to bow to the will of the Soviet, and Trotsky could continue on a Danish boat heading for Russia.

And now arriving in May via Sweden and Finland his greatest hour was to begin. In a way one can call the February revolution a legal one. What had begun in 1905-06 and been interrupted now continued. The Tsarist monarchy had come to the end of their road, and the country was in a turmoil as an effect of the disastrous war, which had effected

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journal. At the time it was published in close to 30'000 copies, one of the biggest and most influential journals in the Soviet Union. It was pushing the official line of course but during the Krustjov thaw in the late 50's it started to publish critical articles and by glasnost it openly became a forum for dissident text, reaching its peak circulation in 1990 of close to three million, in recent years it is down to 3'000.

<sup>5</sup> She was the daughter of a Czarist general out of the Russian aristocracy, having received a first class education (especially in languages, speaking French to her aunts, English to her nanny and Finnish with the peasants on the country estate in Muolla (on the Karelian Isthmus), in addition to being a student of German). Her career within the Soviet Union was in diplomacy, where she was one of the first women to act as ambassadors. She headed the Soviet delegation in Sweden between 1930 and 1945 and then retired due to problems of health, and spent the last years writing on her memoirs, encompassing over 3000 pages, only a fragment of which has been published and remains in the closed archives of the Russian Communist party. For posterity she is mostly remembered for her radical feminism. Her compliance with the Stalinist regime, she did not speak out against the purges, which effected many close to her, has been criticized. She was along Stalin the only survivor into the 50's of the October revolution. Her posting to Stockholm, where she resided in a sumptuous residence, may also have protected her from coming to grief.

the Nation much more than the debacle with the Japanese twelve years earlier. The Tsar resigned without any struggle, hoping that the heir would ascend in due order, of which there was no hope. Russia had become a democratic country, at least in theory if not in practice. There was political chaos, and a sequence of more or less impotent cabinets. There was a scramble for power, and shifting majorities, with heavy infighting among the various sections, not the least among the Socialist, where there was much tension between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, with the Revolutionary Socialists constituting a radical fraction, given to personal acts of terror aimed at specific politicians of power. The chaos, exacerbated by the ongoing war, cried out for a return to normalcy, meaning given the circumstances, the return of an autocratic regime. The serious candidates for such a role could be found on the left by the well-organized Bolsheviks, and on the right by the liberal Cadets<sup>6</sup>, who started to flirt with the reactionary monarchists. The prime minister Kerensky, was a young lawyer, leader of a Socialist party, but of a weak and dithering nature, and like so many other actors of the time being at a loss and out of his depth. Things were going from bad to worse with constant strikes and especially the month of July constituted a crisis during which Trotsky was very active in agitation and administration of an opposing force. The great question is how could power be seized and maintained, and what is really meant by it. The reports of the action of which there are many, are all rather confusing<sup>7</sup>. The crucial question is whether the October Revolution was a case of a *coup d'état* meaning an irregular operation by a strategically placed clique, representing only themselves and anonymous backers. One can compare with the Nazi seizure of power sixteen years later. The Weimar Republic was also a weak one, but unlike the February Revolutionary democracy, it had been muddling through for fifteen years, and had not been toppled within months, although a serious socialist uprising followed the Armistice with the toppling and subsequent exile of the Kaiser. The Nazi takeover, supported by a sizable populist following, which never constituted a majority and actually showed signs of waning, was done by the book, meaning following the rules and regulations of the democratic state, be they twisted. Thus it had a certain legality, and the consolidation of power, which was skillfully done in its brutality, met with very little resistance, in particular it did not lead to a full scale Civil War. Democracies, if resilient at least in principle, are no guarantees against its perversion and being abolished.

To revolutionaries such as Trotsky, it was not a simple 'coup' but the whole process was a result of the will of the masses fulfilling its historical role. Without this conviction and the theoretical underpinning that Marxism provided, there probably would have been no revolution, or at least none which would have left any deeper traces in history. Is this talk about the will of the masses mere metaphysical nonsense? a kind of secular religious illusion, if there is no God, humans see to it that one is created. Trotsky writes about

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<sup>6</sup> One may think of 'Cadets' as referring to young officers, but in fact it refers to the two letters 'K' (Kah) and 'D' (De) of 'Konstitutional Democrats' thus 'Kah-Dets'.

<sup>7</sup> I have only taken part of pro-Bolshevik accounts, such as the famous one by Reed, and the impression is of restless masses, red banners, enthusiasm, and the overriding will of the masses, in fact almost indistinguishable from propaganda. Maybe alternative accounts by people like Muilikov, a noted historian, could, if not necessarily giving a truer or more well-balanced picture, at least suggest new viewpoints and questions to be asked.



the unconsciousness of the masses becoming conscious in one individual, who thereby can divine it and lead them. He calls this process inspiration and the insights it gives as intuitional and compares them with the creative efforts of an artist, especially an author, the creations of which he had had the closest experience of. Much of this makes you think of Jung and his collective unconsciousness into which individuals can come into contact and thus, with the caveat of surviving such a momentous encounter, derive deep insights, mostly of an artistic nature. It is easy to make fun of such explanations, especially in view of their vague nature, which allows little purchase either for rejection or further development; yet they are psychologically very seductive not to say irresistible. As to the credo of historical necessity, ridiculed and rejected by Popper as historicism, it is a very Victorian notion related to the faith in inevitable progress, which in spite of being viewed with skepticism, occasionally verging to disdain, still plays a very important role in political thinking, as the present obsession with economic growth (be it for private profit or public welfare) testifies to. As to the more or less mythological will of the masses, one can refer to the likewise slippery notion of public opinion. While the will of the masses may be rejected as fantasy, public opinion, fickle as it may be, still cannot be rejected. One certainly can speak about moods and commonly shared opinions and prejudices, which have undeniable practical consequences, after all humans are humans, and as such social creatures, who cannot, except in exceptional circumstances, be indifferent to prevailing thoughts and convictions.

In a democratic society referendums and elections have the express purpose of if not divining the will of the people at least reveal public opinion. One may argue, not seldom with conviction, that an election does not necessarily reflect the will of the people, even less so the wisdom of the same, and thus such direct appeals to citizens are, even in impeccable democratic countries, held at a minimum<sup>8</sup>. In less democratic societies, or at least less formally democratic, the wisdom of the people as manifested in a referendum can be rejected as confused and misdirected, and be replaced by one more truly expressing it. Democracy is closely related to justice, which by its very nature is formal and avoids engaging in questions of metaphysical nature, but has to rely on what is expedient. Democracy is about following rules, however frustrating this can be when issues turn concrete and practical. Thus the role of elections in many cases reduces to that of casting a die or consulting an oracle, but does indeed hold those in power accountable to their actions.

It is quite reasonable to expect that public opinion may, at least from time to time, has tended to sympathize with the Bolsheviks. As to democratic manifestations one can point to elections within various Soviets, as well as to the mood of mass gatherings, but such manifestations as the latter should be viewed skeptically, in view of Nazi mass-meetings and those drummed up by Trump<sup>9</sup>. Still the mass-meetings skillfully played on by Trotsky, certainly influenced the mood in the streets, without necessarily being so overwhelmingly

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<sup>8</sup> An example is the referendum that led to Brexit, which in the opinion of many was not a wise decision and one that should never have put to the voters in such direct terms. Voters are fallible as to technical questions and easily swayed by propaganda and vulnerable to manipulation.

<sup>9</sup> The rightist populism of Trump are quick to ascertain significance of such pseudo-events, thus ironically endorsing the justifications traditionally held forth by the left, which has provided so much inspiration to the populist right.

representative, as it is tempting to assert. The Soviets provided a more tangible political platform and the legitimacy such endows. Then there is the issue of military force, the last resort. Whoever in the end wins the favor of those in arms, holds the strongest arm<sup>10</sup>. The Russian army was in tatters, and whatever garrison there were in the cities, its loyalty was undecided and hence volatile.

Trotsky may have been a theoretician with his head in metaphysical clouds, but he was also a very practical man, a combination of which supposedly is very rare (on the other hand there is nothing more practical than a solid theory). The act of insurrection, as told by Trotsky, seemed to have been more than anything an administrative affair. We are told that he and Lenin were holed up in the Smolny (a former school for upper-class girls) more or less around the clock, making endless practical decision (their minds working in remarkable parallel coming to similar conclusions) always on the phone, surrounded by assistants, scurrying back and forth. Clearly Lenin and Trotsky, sharing the command (although Trotsky does acknowledge the political superiority of Lenin<sup>11</sup>), seems to be two generals in the central military office, masterminding a campaign. For all those bustle, or rather because of it, it is not easy to get an idea of what it was all about in a technical sense. What does it really mean to assume and hold power, as opposed to dream about it? And, one should not forget, that this action took place in Petrograd, an isolated (if nominal capital) at an eastern periphery, and traditionally rather unrepresentative of Russia at large. A traditional conundrum among the Russian Marxist intelligentsia was that a classical revolution, in the Marxist sense, would not really be possible in Russia, which lacked a sizable industrial proletariat, being basically a vast and primitive agricultural society<sup>12</sup>. Trotsky certainly was of the conviction that if the Russian revolution was not rather promptly followed by a more extensive one, involving more advanced industrial powers, it was doomed, hence his emphasis on the 'permanent revolution'. In fact when it came to actual revolution, as opposed to dreaming about one, many of the old Bolsheviks were rather timid. In fact Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin did not vote for it, it was Lenin and Trotsky who pushed it through, and in such regard one may view them as adventurers, carried on by an unshakable self-confidence. And even when pushed through, those who dithered, thought of it as a bourgeois one, as supposedly the French one, maybe to be followed in a distant future by a socialist one, with actual Communism to be attained somewhere short of the line at infinity.

Then they had power, and what to do with it? A modern country is ruled by insti-

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<sup>10</sup> Masses of workers were armed, and in the American right it is of utmost importance that law-abiding citizens have unchecked accessibility to guns in order to resist any attempt at tyranny. A rather romantic notion.

<sup>11</sup> As noted there had been a rupture between the two for a long time before the revolution, but a reconciliation had come about when both men realized that they had very much in common and that they had come to the same conclusions independently of each other. This was, as also noted, very important to Trotsky, they were cooperating as equals, and he was no mere 'Lenin-man'.

<sup>12</sup> This was not as correct as it had recently been. Before the Revolution Russia had undergone a rapid industrialization, as was the case with other economically backwards countries such as the Scandinavian ones, and there was in Petrograd the beginnings of an emerging working class of classical Victorian and Marxist cut.

tutions whose loyalty is essential for the running of a country, and that is not something that can be relied upon after a seizure of power. In particular the foreign office, with all its professional diplomatic staff; but also the army, with its officers most of whom one would expect to be loyal to the old regime. Those questions would soon come to be tested.

The first most acute one was to end the war, without peace, nothing could proceed. I recall that in elementary school we were taught that the great mistake made by the first revolutionary regime was to continue the war. There is much truth to that, but to speculate what had happened had they too sued for peace belongs to the fruitless, if seductive, exercises in counter-factual thinking. One explanation could be that there was enough of a continuity between the old regime and the first revolutionary one, to make a continuation of the war natural, and if not, maybe seen as an obligation. The honoring of commitments were not seen as a n obligation by the new power. Besides the Bolsheviks were from the start, along with most Socialists, committed to internationalism, that workers from all over the world would unite against their common foe and that their loyalty was to each other not to the nations that happened to live in. That the Social Democrats in Germany and elsewhere so readily joined in the National fervor was a great disappointment to them, and that explains most of the enmity that Trotsky and his fellow Bolsheviks felt towards the Social Democrats<sup>13</sup>. So Trotsky was sent as a People's commissary to Brest-Litovsk to negotiate with the Germans and the Austrians. It was a matter of pure capitulation as the Russian army was defeated and in disarray. Trotsky saw this as an opportunity to deliver propaganda in the hope that it could reach the German workers. He disdained all pretense of diplomacy and preferred to speak plainly. They also intended to adhere to the principle of no secret diplomatic treaties, thus all in all they were amateurs and tried to take advantage of it. Relations were a bit frosty, but intentionally so, before Trotsky appeared on the scene, the delegation of the Central Powers had pursued a policy of friendliness in order to confuse and exploit the Russian delegates, but none of that, no common meals, it was a question of pure business. Trotsky had to deal with the German diplomat and industrialist the Baron Richard von Kühlmann (1873-1948), the Austrian diplomat the count Ottokar Czernin (1872-1932) and the German general Max Hoffmann (1869-1927) who had along with Hindenburg and Ludendorff masterminded the Russian defeat at Tannenberg<sup>14</sup>. The situation was hopeless and Trotsky decided neither to sign a peace treaty nor to go to war. As a result the German army advanced and occupied the Baltic provinces and Finland<sup>15</sup>, creating independent states, as well as carving out a large piece of western Russia and part of the Ukraine, under German occupation, to recreate

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<sup>13</sup> It can also explain why the German Communists during the rise of Hitler refused to make common cause with the Social Democrats but saw them, not the Nazis, as the main enemy. Something that greatly disturbed and puzzled among others Hobsbawm.

<sup>14</sup> So named by Hindenburg to avenge the defeat of the Teutonic knights by Polish and Lithuanian forces at Grunwald (Tannenberg) in 1410

<sup>15</sup> The situation was more complicated than Trotsky lets on. Finland was seized by Alexander I in the war of 1808-09, but was not fully integrated in the Russian empire, but conceived of as a semi-independent Grand Duchy, with the Russian Tsar at the head as the Grand Duke. This new situation encouraged a Finnish national awakening, having never before had any national identity, which gained momentum as towards the end of the 19th century there was a growing russification of the Duchy which created

Poland. A bitter pill to swallow, but there was no choice.

But this was just the first hurdle, what remained was far more serious, namely to defend the revolution against armed forces hostile to it and in the process of removing it by force. In fact the larger part of Russia was under the armed control of the Whites abetted by French and English intervention. Trotsky was appointed in charge to create a Red Army and defend the new regime against overwhelming military opposition. Trotsky knew nothing about organizing an army and to have it fight successfully. He had to start from scratch. The fact that he managed, learning on the job, is quite remarkable, and whatever your political opinion of him, a source of admiration. He was after all by temperament a man of theoretical speculation, and that it could be translated into successful agitation

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resentment and a movement to achieve greater autonomy, maybe even full independence. Hopes were alighted by the Russian Revolution of 1905 and later on the advent of the First World War where the Russians early on suffered devastating defeats at the hands of the Germans. There was plans to engage large contingents of Swedish military volunteers but the Swedish government stopped those plans, although they had widespread support among Swedes, in order to maintain strict neutrality, so instead the Germans were approached, true they had a bad reputation as seen as the aggressors of the war and having violated Belgian neutrality, but what mattered was of course that they were the enemies of the Russians. When the Tsar abdicated in February 1917 the status of Finland became ambiguous, after all were it not united with Russia solely through the person of the Tsar? Had he abdicated as a Grand Duke of Finland as well? If not could he not retire to Finland, and if, could the Finns not chose another Grand Duke and separate? The provisional government did not look kindly towards a separation, but after the October revolution Lenin was desperate and granted independence in December 1917. However, the situation became more complicated as Finnish Bolsheviks along with other socialists did not recognize the government formed by the bourgeois government headed by Svinhufvud, and an uprising ensued abetted by Russian troops traditionally present in the country and reinforced by contingents of the Red Army. The Finns had no troops themselves but given the desperate situation with major cities like Helsinki and Tampere occupied by the Reds Mannerheim, a former general in the Russian army, was given the assignment to create one from scratch. He managed to do so drawing conscripts among the farmers in central Finland, driving out Russian forces there and in the north. To deal with southern Finland, the government decided to invite the Germans, those were however reluctant to accept the invitation while the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk were under way, Mannerheim also opposed foreign intervention thinking that the Finns could handle it themselves, but would consider if certain conditions were met such as that all German troops were under Finnish command, and that the Germans would publicly state that they had arrived not to meddle in internal Finnish affairs but to aid in driving out the hordes of foreign murderers who had entered Finland illegally. And indeed by April after a few months of Civil War Finland was 'liberated', still negotiations were necessary with the Soviets to settle practical matters, such as borders. The Finns had some unrealistic demands of territorial expansion, but was given the Pesamo region, giving it access to the Arctic sea, in compensation for some territorial adjustments it had suffered under Tsarist times (incidentally the borders of the Grand Duchy were extended into Russia and occupied a larger swath in the east, meaning the Kareian isthmus, than had been the case before the seizure, due to Swedish border concessions in the 18th century). Had the Reds won the Civil War, it is highly unlikely that Finland had attained real independence, their Bolsheviks being but junior partners, having to submit to higher authority. They had demanded that Finland been given the name of 'the Socialist Workers Republic of Finland'.(Source J.H.Wuorinen: A History of Finland, New York 1965)

may not be that surprising, but to organize an army demands practical skills, you would not necessarily expect from such a man.

Where could you find the necessary man-power and motivate them to fight? The only solution must be the peasantry. But how to get the necessary expertise, after all military expertise is something that depends on experience and education. The only solution was that a sufficient number of Tsarist officers could be persuaded to join the ranks and serve as experts and teachers. This was only possible if there would have been a general mood of sympathy with the Bolshevik take over, and that seems to have been the case. But indeed everything hang on a thin thread indeed. In fact from the very outset the situation was extremely critical, Kazan by the Volga had been conquered by the Whites who were ready to advance eastwards and march against Moscow. Trotsky recalls an incredible adventure with him and a few stalwarts going down the Volga in a torpedo boat under the cover of night to put out the batteries of the conquered towns and put the enemy fleet out of operation. An extremely dangerous mission with little chance of succeeding, but it did, if so by fluke, and soon thereafter having demoralized the invaders, troops were able to recapture the city and deflect an immediate danger. Later on in the war, Petrograd was on the verge of being conquered supported by Finnish troops, coming into existence due to the Civil War. Lenin was in favor of abandoning the former capital, the Red Army being pressured on all fronts and could ill afford to spare troops for reinforcement. But Trotsky prevailed, a loss of Petrograd would have dire moral consequences. And once again, against all odds, Trotsky managed to turn pending defeat into victory.

The real hero during the Civil War was the moving train which served as the head quarters. It kept contact with the outer world through telegraph and was equipped with both a battery and a library, and came with a small but dedicated staff. There were attacks and accidents, but it was never put out of commission for long. The author devotes an entire chapter to that train which if anything epitomized his Civil War activity. And after a few years the military opposition had spent itself and invading expedition forces left. What was left was the intrusion by the Polish general Pilsudski which was beaten off, the initial military successes encouraging a move towards Warsaw, supported by Lenin, which turned out to have been an ill-advised adventure, opposed by Trotsky.

After the Civil War the country was in shambles and the economical situation was dire. During it a war communism had been in effect, involving expedient requisitions, but that could not work in peace times. Trotsky pushed for a material incentive for peasants to produce food, although he of course opposed the wealthy Kulaks, whom he, however, did not want to 'exterminate' but to tax heavily. Lenin agreed with him and the New Economic Policy (NEP) came into effect. It might have been seen as a temporary step, after all it involved a revival of capitalism, if strictly circumscribed but nevertheless very efficient. In Trotsky there was an awareness of the opposition between ideological purity and practical pragmatism, where the latter often took precedence, when circumstances called for it, something often referred to as the 'reality principle'.

The years to follow saw some recuperation, but most significantly the rise of Stalin, imperceptibly at first, but then becoming more and more obvious. Stalin had initially been ignored, he was seen as insignificant, a mere apparatchik, with no charm, no theoretical

brilliance, a worthless agitator<sup>16</sup>; yet as it turned out with a great practical sense with a strong component of slyness and unscrupulousness, a hard worker fueled by ambition and resentment towards his superiors. He had been put in charge as the chairman of the party, a post seen as merely administrative, but whose potential Stalin had been quick to assess and develop. Slowly he built a base being in charge of appointments, insignificant one by one, but crucial taken together. What was unfolding was a classical case of a power struggle withing a fairly limited coterie mostly, or at least initially so, consisting of old revolutionaries. Stalin was a careful and cautious operator, but a persistent and ruthless one, respecting no loyalties except those to his own rise to power. Lenin was catching on eventually but too late, his health was declining. First he had been the victim of an assassination attempt by a woman of the Revolutionary Socialists, which, however, had not affected him deeply, far worse was the stroke he suffered in 1922, which left him speechless and paralyzed, but from which he did recover, only to suffer as second one the next year, which eventually led to his death in early 1924. Trotsky remarked that it was ironical, unlike their revolutionary colleagues, neither he nor Lenin suffered from any cardiac problems.

When Lenin died Trotsky was on his way to the Crimea for an extended period of rest having suffered from some mysterious illness with high fevers<sup>17</sup>. He was misled by Stalin (who had delayed the announcement of the death intentionally) when the funeral would take place, indicating that it was to immediate thus making it impossible for the migrant Trotsky to attend. In fact it took place a few days later, which would have made his attendance possible. Not to have been present was of course crucial, marginalizing his position in the party further. One rather morbid decision which was made against the wishes of Lenin's family was to balsamate the body to be displayed in a mausoleum. In this way Lenin was made into a deity, thus exempt from criticism, and being safely dead conveniently available for all kinds of interpretations.

Stalin allied himself with Kamenev and Zinoviev and gaining a majority in the Politbureau he became more and more able to dictate terms. Trotsky was relieved of his position as Commissary of War and reduced to become the head of some unrelated administrative institutions, which however, true to his style, he could not help engage himself in (as Napoleon set about ruling Elba during his first exile). How had he allowed himself to lose power without a struggle? He himself finds the question ill-posed, you do not lose power the same way as you misplace a suitcase. Although he did put up a struggle, unlike that of Kamenev and Zinoviev, with whom he had had a temporary reconciliation initiated by them when they belatedly started to understand the real nature of Stalin; who had caved in at the first sign of Stalin tightening the screws; the fact was that he did no longer have

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<sup>16</sup> Trotsky elaborates on Stalin's defect as having a restricted political horizon (Communism in one country?), a primitive theoretical equipment, his work of compilation, referring to 'The foundations of Leninism' filled with sophomoric errors. And finally referring to his ignorance of foreign languages compelling him to follow political life in other countries only at second hand.

<sup>17</sup> Trotsky had discovered the pleasures of hunting, like any rich landowner, and the accounts of such adventures are remarkable for their vividness told with unchecked enthusiasm, following in a venerable tradition. One of these adventures led to a small accident with soaked feet which developed into a flu, the ramifications of which would turn out to be persistent.

the power to maintain his power; the lay of the land had been changed irretrievably by Stalin.

Exile to distant Alma Ata would follow, along with the exile of his supporters being spread out in the vast expanses of Siberia. As usual he made the best of the situation, including embarking on extensive hunting trips. This internal exile would then be followed by expulsion to Turkey, where he would stay on in splendid isolation on an almost deserted island Prinkipo in the Marmarian Sea working and writing and leading the opposition towards Stalinism. The autobiography being one of the many means of effecting propaganda, settling scores, and getting out his version, which was being suppressed and perverted by his enemies. The latter years in declining power are, however, only summarily dwelt upon, thus to a great extent giving the lie to its purported purpose. Stalin is depicted above all as a mediocrity and his supporters as mere epigones, with no ability of independent creative thought<sup>18</sup>. In fact the policies Stalin would implement would be those that Trotsky had earlier proposed, be they executed in bizarre ways, with little attention to the pragmatic practical side of policies. But of course we have no way of knowing how Trotsky himself would have acted, it is not entirely clear that it would have been a communism with a more human face in that case<sup>19</sup>. It is hard to believe that the brutal industrialization and forced collectivism would have been feasible under anything but dictatorial power and the concomitant terrorism, such would require. The Russian revolution was a brutal affair, and it is tempting, if a bit fanciful, that such a regime naturally selected for the most ruthless of men to take power. In other words one draws the depressing but chastening conclusion that only if Trotsky had turned out to be another Stalin, had he had any prospects of surviving. The Stalinist power did eventually fade following upon the demise of its icon, but with that also the dynamism of the regime, as seen by many, and its decline into ossification and ultimate irrelevance until it eventually imploded. But still the Soviet legacy persistently remained, be it in other forms than socialist utopia. No matter how much lip service to rejection of the past, the spots of a leopard do not change, they go deeper than the ideological skin.

April 5-6, 9-11, 2021 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

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<sup>18</sup> As to historical necessity, he explains the manifestation of a historical law as the biological selection of accidents. Likewise he sees the ascent of Stalinism as the strenuous artificial selection, not of the best but those of the most suitable.

<sup>19</sup> Trotsky was censored for putting a pair of revolutionary socialists to death for having in their turn killed some Bolsheviks (and Lenin had been, as noted, subjected to an assassination attempt by the same party). Could the sentences not have been transmuted to long term prison ones instead? Trotsky heaps scorn on such humanitarian sentiments. In revolution as in war other considerations take precedence. In what way would a mere prison sentence deter, when the opinion at the times was that the Bolshevik regime would be short-lived. And besides how many deaths do not bourgeois regimes mete out, such as the great mass-slaughter engineered by those during the First World War.