

TROTSKY: A BIOGRAPHY

(ROBERT SERVICE)

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I continue to be fascinated by the Bolshevik Revolution, because in its success there are many lessons. Unbiased history and biography of the Bolsheviks is a relatively recent phenomenon; prior to 1991, a combination of lack of primary materials and philo-Communism among Western historians meant very few objective books were published. Since 1991, though, the balance has shifted, even if plenty of Communist-loving propaganda is still published by major historians, because the global Left has always, and continues to, fully support the goals and methods of Communism. They mostly just keep it a bit more quiet in public than they used to.

British historian Robert Service is not one of those, though. He has made a career of dispassionately analyzing Communists and Communism, including writing biographies of Lenin and Stalin. His reward for this is to be regularly attacked by Communists and their allies, and those attacks reached a fever pitch upon the publication of *Trotsky* in 2009. This is because for a hundred years the fiction that Trotsky was the conscience of the Russian Revolution, the man who would have implemented “real Communism” leading to the workers’ utopia, has been maintained with a straight face by a great many influential people all around the world. He is second only to the loathsome “Che” Guevara as the object of idolatry by the modern Left. Thus, since Service shows definitively that Trotsky was just as much an evil killer as Stalin or Lenin, philo-Communists were not pleased, and attempted to, among other things, suppress publication and dissemination of his book. They were not successful, though of course the point of such attempts is not to actually succeed against people like Service, but to warn the less established that they must toe the line.

Service has much appreciation for Trotsky’s virtues, however. He was brilliant, an outstanding writer and polemicist, decisive, and personally brave. He lost the competition to succeed Lenin because of his limitations—inability to build coalitions, ability to make enemies, and failure to see where events were leading. Trotsky inspired loyalty in those who followed him, and hatred in those he opposed. Unfortunately for him,

over the decades the former group shrank in size, and the latter grew, until he was assassinated in 1940 in Mexico City. Perhaps indicative of the mental hold he had over others, the last words (in 1978) of Ramón Mercader, his assassin, were "I hear it always. I hear the scream. I know he's waiting for me on the other side."

Trotsky was born Leiba Bronstein, in southern Ukraine, in 1879. His father was what was later called a *kulak*; his grandfather was an agricultural colonist who came south as part of the plans of Alexander I to make the lands near the Black Sea more productive, mostly by resettling Jews. At age eight Bronstein was sent to a state school in Odessa. At age sixteen, he fell in with bad company and became a Marxist true believer, mostly only in the discussion circle sense. Doubtless, like other politically active sixteen-year-olds, what he had to say was very tedious. His little group, aiming at higher ambitions, had no trouble raising money to cause trouble for the authorities; Service notes that they "set about gathering money from sympathizers: this was normal procedure at the time since not a few wealthy citizens either disliked the Imperial political order or wanted to defend themselves against being associated with it in any future revolutionary situation." Their activities consisted of writing and disseminating revolutionary propaganda; Bronstein quickly discovered the genius for writing and polemic that set him apart for his entire life. But in 1898, when he was nineteen, Bronstein and all the other members of his group were arrested for revolutionary agitation.

Unlike under later, ideological, regimes, this didn't mean all that much to a young man. In fact, such an arrest enhanced his reputation among his peers. After some time in a comfortable jail, during which he got married to another revolutionary from his group, Bronstein was sentenced to four years in "administrative exile"—i.e., he was sent to a village in Siberia, a stock Tsarist punishment. There he was free to do as he pleased. But rather than serve out his sentence with his wife and, soon enough, two babies, he learned of Vladimir Lenin's publication in Germany of a new underground newspaper, *Iskra* ("Spark"). He wanted in; he wanted to be relevant; he was nothing if not vain and self-centered; therefore he assumed (correctly, as it turned out) that he was critical to this movement. So he "escaped" in 1902, abandoning his wife, and went to Geneva, where some of the *Iskra* board members lived. Lenin, however, was in London, where the real action was at, so off Bronstein

went, changing his name to Trotsky for good measure, and soon taking up with Natalya Sedova, who was his partner for the rest of his life.

At this time, there were many Marxist groups, cutting across borders, and few clear lines. Trotsky sometimes lined up with Lenin, sometimes not, and vicious political arguments, in print and in person, were the norm among all Marxists. Lenin and *Iskra* were important, but by no means dominant. In 1903 the main Russian group, the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party, split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, with Lenin leading the former. Trotsky was neither (after briefly being a Menshevik). Among other things, Trotsky soon enough was accusing Lenin of Jacobinism, as opposed to truly representing the proletariat. But in 1906 Trotsky (along with many other leaders of the new St. Petersburg "Soviet") was arrested again, and sentenced to more Siberian exile. Naturally, he escaped on the way, and went back to London, but quickly moved to Vienna, where he stayed until the war began.

Trotsky was prominent in Marxist revolutionary circles, but not dominant. He was not a member of, much less a leader of, any faction. Unlike Lenin, he tried to be a uniter, not a divider (a task hampered by his vanity and arrogance; he was always happy to let everyone know who the smartest person in the room was). Unsuccessful at being elected to party leadership, he set out to write his way to relevance, through books and magazines, but mostly through writing in the new newspaper *Pravda*. That newspaper is remembered by those who lived through the 1980s as the punch line to a bad joke, but at this time was highly influential.

World War I upset the apple cart. It reshuffled the position of all the Marxists; some, like Lenin, resolutely advocated Russian defeat as the most likely route to civil war and the worker's revolution. Others abandoned Marxism. Trotsky held steadfast in his belief in proletarian revolution, trying to hold all the threads together, and participating in the 1915 Zimmerwald Conference, pushing a successful "moderate" line that ultimately Lenin temporarily endorsed. The French quickly tired of Trotsky, who had moved to France as a magazine correspondent, and deported him to Spain, and the Spanish deported him to New York, where he proceeded to agitate some more. But in 1917 the February Revolution overthrew Nicholas II, and Trotsky hurried back to Russia.

The events following are expertly covered by Sean McMeekin's excellent recent *The Russian Revolution*, in a much more interesting fashion than

by Service. The Bolsheviks were not shot out of hand by the Kerensky government, as they should have been, and they managed to seize power. This was due in large part to Trotsky's skill; Service quotes him as describing his approach, "The attacking side is almost always interested in seeming on the defensive. A revolutionary party is interested in legal coverings." His tactical skill, along with his oratory and writings, were critical components of Bolshevik success. Upon taking power, they, with Trotsky's leadership and full approval, immediately began a reign of bloody terror that within a few weeks dwarfed the past century of Tsarist political repression. In the Civil War, Trotsky, despite no military background, took command of the Red Army with considerable success, considerable bravery, and considerable brutality. Trotsky was in favor of the Civil War, like Lenin, because it gave them the best chance to exterminate as many enemies of the Revolution as possible, a chance they took every advantage of.

After the Bolsheviks won the Civil War, though, Trotsky's political position began to erode. He had made a lot of enemies, and many Bolsheviks were worried that Trotsky fancied himself the Russian Napoleon, and would try to become him after Lenin's death. (No doubt his obsessive need to win at games, like Napoleon, contributed to that view.) Internal disputes grew among the victors, revolving around such matters as how independent trade unions should be (Trotsky thought not independent at all, since the state now fully represented the workers). Still, Bolshevik consolidation of power through terror continued, with Trotsky leading the charge, openly endorsing terror and killing (something his supporters have tried to hide or downplay for decades), while manipulating Western governments into recognizing and funding the new Communist regime, and attacking the Russian Orthodox Church.

Soon enough, Trotsky's main competitor for second-most-important, after Lenin, became Stalin, who while not as smart, was more clever and more politically astute. Most importantly, all Stalin wanted was to be in charge, while Trotsky was happy to be an important man in a working power structure. Gradually Trotsky was edged from power, forming an informal "left opposition," and watching his influence slip away. This process really accelerated when Lenin became disabled and then died; towards the end, as Stalin tightened his grip, Trotsky still retained his famous rapier wit: "At one meeting addressed by Trotsky

a zealous official switched off the lights. Trotsky declared: 'Lenin said that socialism was the soviets plus electrification. Stalin has already suppressed the soviets, now it's the turn of the electricity.' "

But the end came—Trotsky was internally exiled, then deported to Turkey. From there, he went to Mexico, still trying to breathe life into the dying ashes of his international influence. He created the Fourth International, which modern Trotskyists like to think is relevant, and corresponded with various people. He wrote books, in part for money, but mostly to get out his point of view, often glossing over inconvenient parts of his past. But his influence inside the Soviet Union was zero, and his entire family remaining in Russia (including his first wife) were killed (one of his two sons died in France after an operation, probably assassinated). He therefore outlived all his four children. Trotsky also amused himself by having an affair with that nasty piece of work, ugly Stalinist painter of ugly paintings Frida Kahlo, who was the wife of the artist Diego Rivera, in whose house Trotsky found refuge for a time (along with his partner, Natalya). Trotsky never lost faith in Communism; he just thought Stalin had perverted it and made it tyrannically bureaucratic, but that the Soviet Union was still a shining beacon, and capitalism (meaning the West) was doomed (which it is, or probably is, but not for the reasons Trotsky thought, which are obviously laughable at this remove, although to be fair between the Great Depression and the World Wars the argument was a bit stronger then).

Trotsky was tried in absentia by Stalin and sentenced to death. Western intellectuals and Communist fellow travelers of the time (but I repeat myself) took the verdict as valid, and believed, for the most part, that Trotsky was indeed a betrayer of the Revolution. He still had some supporters, but a lot more enemies, and plenty of those on the Right, too, obviously. After a botched attempt by a group of Mexican Communists, Stalin succeeded in getting Mercader into Trotsky's guarded compound, taking advantage of Trotsky's refusal to believe that bad people were everywhere out to get him, whereupon Mercader bashed in his head with an ice axe.

Trotsky has had an earthly afterlife, not because of his genius, but because the Communist delusion needed something to coalesce around after the myriad unparalleled crimes of actual, in-practice, Communism were revealed. Thus, starting in the 1960s, significant segments of

the international Left have claimed to be inspired by, or followers of, Trotsky, although given that his works were neither original nor comprehensive nor coherent, this says more about his “followers” than it does about Trotsky. In Russia, of course, he has no relevance at all—as Service puts it in one of his few non-pedestrian writing passages, there he is “an antiquarian curiosity, something to be discussed along with Fabergé eggs, Ivan the Terrible or peasant weaving patterns.” (My sole complaint about this book is the writing style, which is very plain and very choppy. Perhaps this is a taste thing, since it’s Hemingway-esque, if less descriptive in tone, and I think Hemingway is grossly overrated. Maybe Service thinks the opposite. But short sentence follows short sentence, endlessly, and no flow ever develops, so the reader has to plow through the paragraphs, like an icebreaker through Arctic ice. The facts are all there, but it’s only a small step from plain and choppy to bullet points. Still, one can communicate through bullet points, so I suppose this is not a fatal problem, just an irritating one.)

The author does not obsess about Trotsky being Jewish, but he does not ignore it. The fact was central to Trotsky’s life: in his youth as an orthodox Jew, and from his teen years on as an atheist Jew, his Jewishness played a significant role in his decision-making. Part of this was that he sometimes resonated with other Jews, given the common background, but most of it was more meta than that—it was not his Jewishness, but his awareness of other people’s awareness of his Jewishness. Thus, he hesitated to take too prominent a role in certain situations, knowing that the Revolution might not benefit from an increase in anti-Jewish sentiment. And there was plenty of that, Trotsky or not, in part because the Bolsheviks’ enemies used any criticism at hand, and in part because there were, in fact, lots of Jews among the Bolsheviks, something that was used quite a bit against Jews in later decades. Service quotes the classic formulation of the impact, from Jacob Maze, Chief Rabbi of Moscow, “Trotsky makes the revolutions, and the Bronsteins pay the bills.”

I learned quite a lot new from this book, though it was mostly interesting detail about Trotsky, not about the Bolsheviks, the Russian Revolution, or Communism. There has been a recent vogue among some on the fringy Right to ascribe the success of Communism to a supposed appeal to low status people in Russia and elsewhere, offering them higher status in exchange for loyalty to Communism. (The purpose

of this analogy is to offer a parallel to today's Left, which supposedly offers higher status to people who, due to biology or oppression, are low status. This is, apparently, called "Bioleninism"; I've run across it in my examination of some of these fringes.) As a historical analog, it makes no sense, and like so many ideas on the fringy Right, such as those of Mencius Moldbug, it seems to appeal to those who have no real grasp of history. (On the other hand, as a secondary explanatory device only of today's Left, it actually isn't bad at all. It's the claimed historical analogies I object to as false.)

It is simply not true that Russian Communism recruited primarily from the lower status castes of Russian society. If that were true, it would have been peasants who dominated Communism, and actual peasants never wanted anything to do with Communism. Rather, it was people like Trotsky—intellectuals on the make and on the rise. Communists successfully recruited all across the societal spectrum. For example, most of the Bolsheviks' military officers were former Tsarist officers, all through the ranks—a policy that Trotsky insisted on, that professionals run the Red Army, not amateurs. But those officers weren't drawn to Communism by its offer of higher status, which they already had—some thought the Bolsheviks the lesser of two evils, some thought they could help control the Bolsheviks, some were non-political. And as Service notes, and is commonly noted in histories of the Bolsheviks, massive funding for their activities was provided by high-status people who were either ideologically sympathetic or simply as an insurance policy. Such examples could easily be multiplied. Certainly, some Bolsheviks came from humble circumstances, but all successful societies, of whatever political stripe, have mechanisms for bringing the most talented into the running of society. Typically this is through the Church or through the military; some, like the Ottomans, are better at it than others. But to suggest that what drove Bolshevism's initial success was low-status individuals getting back at those who lorded it over them is bad history. True, within a few decades it was mediocrities all the way down, but that merely shows a poorly organized system, or one inherently defective, not one that appeals to low-status people.

No, what the Bolsheviks offered was heaven on earth, and to each man, the most important driver of human action, transcendence, the ability to participate in the formation of this heaven. In Trotsky's own

words: "Man will become incomparably stronger, more intelligent, more subtle. His body will be more harmonious, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical; the forms of daily existence will acquire a dynamic theatricality. The average human type will rise to the level of Aristotle, Goethe, Marx. It is above this ridge that new summits will rise." Or, as Service says, "[Trotsky] never recoiled from his belief that the October Revolution was the first great glimmering of the dawn of the global socialist era." "He believed in the achievability of a universal order which would totally liberate the human spirit."

Transcendence is a far more powerful driver than status seeking, and it is that which explains the lure of Communism through the past century. No doubt the modern Western Left, with its obsessive focus on emancipation from imaginary oppression, offers increases in status, and a complete divorce of status from merit, more so than formal Communism did, but that is not its main attraction. Such emancipation is a type of seeking after transcendence, even if it has more immediate benefits for some, and it is the collective belief in being able to remake the world to achieve "new summits" that provides the dynamo inside the Left, which is fundamentally a religious belief. I am not sure, given how central this urge is to human nature and the grip it clearly maintains on so many people, how to destroy that dynamo. Probably by providing and drawing people to an alternate, more powerful, religious belief, something that the spiritually decayed West has failed at through the past century. What Trotsky's life teaches us is that very smart and very talented people can wholly buy into such beliefs, and their drive to achieve transcendence, and the costs they are willing to impose, should never be underestimated.