

# The Autobiography of Leon Trotsky

MY LIFE, by Leon Trotsky. Chas Scribner's Son, 600 pages. On Sale by the Militant for \$5.00 per copy.

The profoundest contribution the average bourgeois thinker has made to analyzing the struggle between the principal currents in the modern revolutionary movement which have clashed most violently in the Soviet republic has been that it is a struggle between Trotsky and Stalin "for power". Particularly is this the conception of the petty bourgeois and his intellectual off-spring, that hopeless section of modern society which constantly seeks salvation from the hammer and anvil by the intervention of some great man who has no relation to the classes and stands above them. It may be added that this idea has not failed to find nourishment in the hideous propaganda against the Russian Marxists conducted for almost seven years now by the ruling apparatus, especially in the whispering campaign of the earlier periods of the fight in which slanders were circulated against Trotsky that nobody—at least in those days—dared to say or write publicly.

Such a notion is not a new one. It did not arise for the first time in connection with the fight of the Opposition against the backsliding apparatus. Similar profound struggles have been explained in this way by philistines and small minds: one need but refer to the seas of ink expended in showing that the First International was wrecked on the reef of personal antagonism and place-seeking between Marx and Bakunin. The same shabby criterion will undoubtedly be applied in future social battles where outstanding personalities or outstanding mediocrities occupy a large place on the canvas of events. And that is so perhaps because there cannot yet be established, in the welter of ideas that make up social thought, a law against stupidity and ignorance.

## The Role of the Individual in History

This does not mean to deny, but rather to affirm, that individuals play an enormous role and often a decisive one in the development or retardation of historical processes. It is on the reverse side of the philistine's blind adoration for all-sufficiency and omnipotence of "great men" that he frequently marks his mystic awe before the course of social forces which he does not understand and is incapable of influencing or guiding forward—an inability which he sometimes erects into a universal law. Man does not make history out of the whole cloth, said Marx; but nevertheless he makes it. And great men make great history. They are produced by social convulsions and conflicts and in turn they influence their production. Therein lies the inter-connection between the conflict and harmony of outstanding men and outstanding events, of individuals and the social struggle. And therein lies the great value, the permanent significance of comrade Trotsky's autobiography. It is as much a vital contribution to the conflict and harmonies we have mentioned as it is their product. It could only be written as a result of a social war on a huge scale. In itself it is a battle fought—and won.

That it is, as the reviewers everywhere have remarked, a work of extraordinary literary qualities, (it is one of the greatest literary works of our time), that it is uncommonly absorbing reading aside from all other considerations, that the book has a brilliant arresting style, an unusual power of narrative, that warm sense of humor, the wealth of imagery and color which has placed him in the front ranks of the modern writers—all this only enhances its worth, but does not determine it.

## The Making of a Revolutionist

A review of a book is obviously not the book. In this case it can only be a quite insufficient comment on some of its most interesting sections, a comment which grays before the vividness of its subject.

Trotsky's life has of course been intimately bound up with the development of the most important event of our age, the Russian proletarian revolution, since the end of the last century. Fifty years of age, by far the greater part of his life been unchangingly devoted to the accomplishment and furtherance of the proletarian revolution and its aims.

The breath-taking variety of the circumstances under which he has pursued

this life-work makes his book read like a romance of adventure. At the age of 18, he had already plunged up to his ears in the earliest revolutionary organizations, in Odessa, where he immediately occupied an active and prominent place. At 19, following a czarist raid, he was given his first taste of prison life. From prison he was sent into his first Siberian exile, the first of three, from two of which he escaped, and from the last of which he was deported to Turkey by the usurpers who are so cruelly squandering the glorious heritage of the Russian revolution.

In his first exile abroad he made the acquaintance of the leaders of the then united Russian social democracy, also in exile: Lenin, Plechanov, Martov, Deutsch, Zussulitch and others. He had come before a crucial moment in the history of the Russian movement, the split between the majority (Bolsheviks) and the minority (Mensheviks), a split that involved his first break with Lenin which the record-forgers have so monstrously exaggerated and misrepresented in recent times. On the eve of the 1905 revolution, he was back again in St. Petersburg under an assumed name, and when the uprising occurred, he was named the president of the Petersburg Soviet of Workers Deputies after the unmissed disappearance of its first chairman, the democratic lawyer, Khrustalyov. The leader and spokesman of this dawn of the more lasting revolution to come more than a decade later, he was arrested after its defeat together with the other deputies and following a sensational trial, exiled once more to the Siberian wastes, only to escape abroad again.

## Trotsky's Activity in Exile

For years in the teeming life of the emigrated and exiled Russian social democracy, he was head over heels absorbed in the struggles of the two principal factions (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks), denounced now by the one, now by the other, but at all times energetically laboring to assemble an army for the inevitable second Russian revolution. True internationalist, he did not confine his activities to the Russian movement. He was found at the international congress, at conventions of the then imposing German social democracy, in Austria, in the Balkans, making life-long political and personal acquaintanceships in one place, as with Rakovsky, or venomous and implacable foes in another—Trotsky is hardly noted for any gentleness or hypocritical softness in his relations with political opponents!

After the fearful collapse of the Second International under the earthquake of the imperialist war, the fighter is again in the front ranks, raking the German social traitors with the same ferocity as the French "Defenders of the Fatherland", and condemned alike not only by them but also by their warring masters: in contumacious by the German Junkers and by expulsion from France. Expulsion also from Spain. Then a voyage to the new world—his only trip to the United States. In this country, an editor of the Russian Marxist journal, *Navy Mir*, and a foundation layer—with emigrated Russians, with Lore, with Fraina and others—of the movement which took form in the Socialist Propaganda League, and later formed one of the elements that organized the necessary split of the corrupt Socialist Party and formed the Communist movement in America. En route back to Russia with the first news of the Kerenky revolution, he is interned in a Canadian concentration camp, deported, and then the arrival in Petrograd to be, with Lenin, the organizer and leader of the great victory. The Truth Confronts the Stalinist Liars

His activities in and after the revolution itself, in the best years of the young dictatorship and of the Communist International are rich and indelible, and not all the oceans of mud, not all the befogging clouds of official propaganda can succeed in concealing them now for any length of time or for any substantial amount of people. History was too deeply engraved in that period to be recarved today or erased by filling the tracings with the impermanent putty of official fraud factories. The simple re-telling of the events which really took place are sufficient to bring out the original precision of those carvings in highest relief. The few hundred pages of the book are a mortal blow to the whole

new school of what, for lack of a more appropriate designation, is called the Stalinist historian, bought and paid for to write history as it never happened for the purpose of weaving a monstrously inexact legend about the equally monstrous figure of Stalin. It is as though all the labors of these dark figures were brought together into one misshapen form and crushed under the concentrated truth of Trotsky's book. It is in this connection that Trotsky runs to questions that have frequently been posed by revolutionary workers: To precisely what extent is the struggle between the Marxist wing and the bureaucratic apparatus a "personal" struggle, one of "individuals"; and why is it that the Opposition, the leaders and foremost fighters for the revolution, was defeated in the Party which was in the best sense of the word its own? The answer is not too difficult to find.

A period of social convulsions and surge, a period of revolutionary advance, brings into the foreground the great individuals of the advancing class. But for a period of stagnation, or for a period of reaction, men of colorless talents are required—not a period of counter-revolution, it is clear, for that also requires men who are in a certain sense great men, but of a period of peaceful reaction, so to speak. In a conversation with Trotsky, his friend Skylansky said: "You know, it is amazing how, during this last period, the mean, the self-satisfied mediocrity is pushing itself into every sphere. And all of it finds in Stalin its leader. Where does it all come from?"

"This is the reaction after the great social and psychological strain of the first years of revolution," Trotsky replied. "A victorious counter-revolution may develop its great men. But its first stage, the Thermidor, demands mediocrities who can't see farther than their noses. Their strength lies in their political blindness, like the mill-horse that thinks that he is moving up when really he is only pushing down the belt-wheel. A horse that sees is incapable of doing the work."

## How Mediocrities Like all: Arise

The period of reaction that set in in Russia after the tragic defeats of the revolutions in Germany and Bulgaria in 1923 and the subsequent retardation of the revolutionary movement in Europe—the only real salvation for an isolated Russian Socialist state—"produced" its Stalin with the same inexorableness that it "required" the organizational beheading of the revolutionary section of the Party. It "required" the campaign against the pestiferous Trotskyists and their internal din and bustle, their "sectarian" insistence upon the "permanent revolution", their contempt for the sweet lulling music of socialism in one country, their constant prodding of the soft and self-contented, the revolutionist of yesterday who had become a "solid" Soviet citizen, who had "made" the revolution in the sweat of his brow and was anxious to settle down quietly to enjoy the fruits of it without being interrupted by the clamorous requirements of the international revolution. Only a period of social and political reaction could—to continue with inadequate "personal" similes and analogies—accomplish the monstrous historical perversions, these sleight-of-hand tricks by which a Lenin and a Trotsky are changed for a Stalin or a... Molotov, the rebel English miner for a Purcell, the Chinese coolie for a Chiang Kai Shek, the Russian factory workers for the office bureaucrat, the poor peasant for the smug kulak who will "grow into socialism". No other answer to the two questions, which are one question, can find a place in the mosaic of recent events.

## The Stalinist Intrigue against the Bolshevik Revolutionists

But for such an enormous displacement of things, for such a turning of values upon their head, a most intricate and elaborate mechanism is needed, for processes in social life are not entirely realized by themselves. It is with an examination of the mechanics of the change, and not only with its dynamics, that a good section of the biography is occupied. With an uncommon meticulousness and respect for facts, Trotsky traces every intrigue against the revolutionary wing of the Party, and against himself, in particular, as its most notable exponent. He takes all the otherwise un-

related figures of the time, all the events, all the disconnected threads of men and things, and puts them together in their proper place. The result is a completely woven fabric, distinct in every intertwining of its cords, that enables the reader to understand and follow that horrible enormity that has been the beginning and end of wisdom in the official Communist movement since Lenin died: the campaign against a so-called Trotskyism. Not every lie can be replied to: that would require a Britannica; but the new ones and the old ones served up with a new sauce which are important or characteristic are destroyed with a surgical efficiency and completeness. It is much less a defense than an attack. It takes the men and less than men who are in today's high places. It tells us who they are, how and why they got there. We are startled by things we formerly only suspected or never knew. We learn for the first time for instance that scores upon scores of those self-labelled "Old Bolsheviks", who we had been taught for years had been "loyal disciples of Lenin and Bolshevism" for anywhere from 20 to 30 years—the while Trotsky was a scoundrelly Menshevik, conciliator or what you will—were in cold reality (before the revolution, and some afterwards as well!) not only in the camp of Menshevism, but even further to the right. Between 1905 and 1917, many of these two-for-a-penny "Old Bolsheviks" were at best revolutionary democrats, or else had quit the movement entirely and retired to a quiet bourgeois life. We begin here to learn something about these sturdy "Old Bolsheviks" like Gussev who left the movement for ten years in the hard days of the reaction and turned up in 1925 in the United States to teach us that the essence of Bolshevism in this country consisted in the cabled manufacture of Lovestone, Pepper and Ruthenberg as the consecrated Leninistic leaders of the American Party. Trotsky mentions many others like Gussev to one extent or another, Yaroslavsky, Ordjonikize, Petrovsky of the Ukraine for instance, and their heroic deeds of the past. Had Trotsky been guilty at any time of half of their colossal blunders and conceptions that had not even a hat-tipping acquaintance with Marxism, Stalin would undoubtedly have dared to exile him in 1924 instead of waiting four years longer! It is precisely such people who find a place in the present period; in the first five years of the revolution the movement went forward without ever suspecting their existence—it never mattered.

## A Great Political Document

Of them all, naturally, Stalin emerges the worst. The full length portrait Trotsky draws of him is a murderous one—for Stalin. No man can live long as a political figure of any consequence with so deadly an epitaph written for him, one may say, in advance. In regard to the history of the campaign against "Trotskyism", the facts, events and persons involved, the book stands as a challenge to every serious revolutionist. It is no platitude, but a profound truth, to say that he who dares read it, enemy though he may be at the commencement, must end by being, at the very least, tremendously influenced by Trotsky's point of view. We hope that every rebel worker, and particularly every worker in the official Communist Party, will accept the challenge.

The conclusion of the book—where Trotsky so splendidly castigates the democratic illusionists of the whole world on the subject of his application to the right of asylum—shows him at once oblivious to any "personal tragedy" and quietly confident of the future. Anybody who has been fortunate enough to be with him even for a few days on the deserted islet of Prinkipo and seen him at work with the same energy, devotion and self-assurance that marked him when he led the victorious Red Army, will know immediately that what he says about the future is not pretty literature but a natural conviction, the certainty that the course of events, interrupted and diverted from their proper line of march though they may be for the moment, must eventually vindicate the foreseings and foretellings of revolutionary Marxism. The work of the Communist Opposition is a contribution to this vindication. The autobiography of comrade Trotsky is another. It is a battle fought—and won.

—MAX SHACHTMAN