

«MY LIFE» - and Its Critics DeWitt, Browder and Gold on Trotsky's Autobiography

By James P. Cannon

To a revolutionary all activity is a form of struggle and every instrument is a weapon. Cooped up in Constantinople through the amicable cooperation of Stalin and Kemal Pasha—"patiently, waiting for what is to follow"—Trotsky writes his memoirs, and they become a bombshell whose explosion resounds throughout the world.

"My Life" is a literary sensation. The "critics" are amazed at the brilliance of its literary execution. The skillful arrangement of words, in their conception, is an art which belongs exclusively to those who have nothing to say. The legend that wisdom expresses itself through dullness has a wide popularity but that fact does not give it any real value. Why should those who devote themselves to the struggle for ideas not learn the art of presenting them effectively? Trotsky has done this to a superlative degree and has thereby added to his power and stature as a revolutionary politician. His book, besides being a literary masterpiece is a mighty weapon in the political struggle. This, in fact, is its essence.

Political Autobiography

"In these pages," says the author, "I continue the struggle to which my whole life is devoted. Describing, I also characterize and evaluate; narrating, I also defend myself, and more often attack." And again: "This is a book of polemics. It reflects the dynamics of that social life which is built entirely on contradictions." So, in the introduction, the author sets the keynote for his work. That he has succeeded in his design is attested by the flood of comment which the book has called forth—comment which shows that his political blows have hit their mark.

The positive political qualities of Trotsky's memoirs have already been evaluated in the *Militant*. Since then a number of hostile reviews have appeared in other columns. A review of these reviews should enable us to bring out more sharply and clearly the essential character of the autobiography, since a book, like a man, is also to be judged by the enemies it has made.

As far as the bourgeois writers are concerned it suffices to say that not one of them, to our knowledge, has failed to understand that Trotsky's standpoint is what it has always been. The millions of words that have been written to prove that he has become a renegade to the revolution and an ally of the bourgeoisie have all been wasted as far as these same bourgeois are concerned. For them, now, as before, Trotsky is the symbol and representative of the October revolution, and, insofar as they depart from the purely literary side of his book and express opinions on the Party struggle, their "sympathies" are invariably given to the "practical" Stalin as against the "visionary" Trotsky. This simple fact speaks volumes.

The Social Democrats

If we turn to the social democratic press we meet the same phenomenon. "Trotskyism" has more than once been labelled a "social democratic deviation" in solemn official documents of the Comintern. But with a strange perversity these people also fail to catch the point. The *New Leader's* review of "My Life" is no less hostile than those of the Stalin press, and—what is especially noteworthy—its bitter criticisms reveal such an identity of content with the Stalinist reviews that one could hardly distinguish between them if they were printed side by side in the same journal, with the names of the authors omitted.

Let us first consider the review in the *New Leader* for May 10th by S. A. DeWitt. The reviewer is somewhat of a "literary" man himself and the conductor of "The Chatter Box". One might think that Trotsky has suffered enough of misfortune and tribulation. But no, another cruel disappointment awaits him: "comrade" DeWitt disapproves of Trotsky and his book, too. He says so straight out with all the heavy solemnity of a man who knows the weight and import of his words.

Trotsky's autobiography is a masterful exposition of the historic process in which individuals are playing their parts. His own activities are related and subordinated to it with an objectivity that is un-

ique in literature of this kind. But, even so, the book remains an autobiography, not a history. It does not merely describe the historic events but relates also the part the author played in them. And this is the first point of DeWitt's complaint.

"There is so much of Leon Trotsky in those six hundred pages of print and phrase that one receives only a hazy outline of the Russian episode." Again: "I'm terribly sorry to have allowed so much animus to creep into a review of a book. But Trotsky has left me so little of impersonal material to judge, and so much of himself, that no other procedure is possible." Well, that's too bad. But how could it be helped? As Trotsky himself remarked: "Nobody has yet succeeded in writing an autobiography without writing about himself."

A big section of the book is devoted to the Party struggle that began with Lenin's fatal illness. The account is a political analysis which shows that it was not as the philistines think, simply a struggle of persons for power. "The struggle of the epigones for power, as I shall try to prove, was not merely a struggle of personalities; it represented a new political chapter—the reaction against October, and the preparation of the Thermidor." On this thesis Trotsky bases his account of the Party struggle; but it is all lost on DeWitt.

He sees, or pretends to see, only the personal side of the struggle and takes Trotsky to task for failing to play the game like a good sport. The conductor of "The Chatter Box" chides the organizer of the Revolution and the Red Army: When it came to stepping down from your pet theories, and playing along with your political comrades on a 'give and take' basis you flopped miserably. Either they would do as you ordered, or they were betraying the revolution.

"This business of being as infallible as God is so stupid."

One might think that DeWitt would stop at this and call it a day. But the Trotsky-killer has tasted blood and presses on remorselessly. "I, for one wouldn't swap a regiment of strutting Trotskys for one Stalin." There's another vote to make it still more "unanimous". He must have thought he was writing a Party thesis. He continues: "Calling all of us names, and then spitting so viciously at Stalin convinces us beyond further argument that your present fall from grace is the direct result of the poetic judgement... wherein great pride cometh before a fall."

Trotsky might receive a grace if he would be a bit humble under his adversities, but his stubborn pride shuts out even that. And he doesn't understand the workers either! "There is an aristocracy about your carriage," says DeWitt, "throughout the adventure which belies your oft-quoted love for the proletariat. There is so little about the workers in your narrative. All you are taken up with is your theoretical paragraphing in this radical journal and that." And so on and so forth. We must leave DeWitt here while we try to catch up with his line of argument in other columns.

The Stalinists

The Stalinists had to take notice of the book in question in order to bury once again the doctrine that has died so many deaths at their hands. And they have done the job this time with characteristic brilliance choosing for the medium, the *New Masses*.

Why the *New Masses* of all places and all things? The explanation is simple. Up till now the *New Masses* confined itself in the war against "Trotskyism" to the modest role of keeping quiet, suppressing all material on the question and refusing paid advertisements for our publications. This course was predicated on the theory that it was a "political" matter; and the *New Masses* is a hot-house for the cultivation of that flower of the ages: the proletarian writer who has nothing to say about politics.

But "My Life", it seems, is a "literary" product, and that makes it duck soup for the *New Masses*, which, as everybody knows, is literary at all costs. Consequently we have in the June number not one review but two, and both of them from eminent literati—Earl Browder and Mike Gold.

Quotations from these reviews, after DeWitt's, would weigh this article down with an unavoidable burden of repetition. The soul of DeWitt is marching on in them. The words of "The Chatter Box" leap from the pages of the *New Masses* like armed men from ambush.

Browder, like DeWitt estimates the historic Party struggle as a contest for personal position and dismisses Trotsky's pretensions in the same cavalier fashion. "The theme of the book is how Trotsky happened to become subordinated to Lenin; how he planned to come into his own when Lenin died; and how the "degenerate" leadership of the Communist movement entered into a conspiracy to despoil Trotsky of his inheritance. Around this rather trite detective story scheme the book is built up." Needless to say the shrewd Browder is not fooled by this dodge about "political issues" at the bottom of the contest and like DeWitt refuses to be lured into a discussion of these extraneous questions. "I, Trotsky, had power," he says, "This was taken away from me by a conspiracy of the degenerate leadership of the Party headed by Stalin." And from this follows logically his pontifical admonition: "The dictatorship of the proletariat can have no more dangerous or insidious enemy than a leader inside its apparatus who thinks in terms of personal power."

Browder Joins the Freudians

For Browder, as for his confrere of the *New Leader*, there is too much Trotsky in Trotsky's book about his life, and the two reviewers meet again in protest against his "underestimation of the working class". "As a matter of fact"—we are quoting Browder now—"it is almost impossible to find any hint of the existence of the working class in this book. It exists only to provide a dark background which throws into higher relief the brilliant exploits of Trotsky."

What is left of Trotsky after these withering blasts? Putting an upstart in his place is what we call it. And it is to be hoped that he will stay there when he gets the following profound diagnosis of the whole trouble. Trotsky refers to Marx and tries to hinge his case on the Marxist method of social analysis. Browder declines to follow him into this field, being too smart, as they say in the West, to play another man's game. Browder appeals to Freud, and the result is fatal—for Marx as well as for Trotsky. Trotsky has a "complex" says the reviewer—Browder, not DeWitt. Lenin once gave him a pair of shoes which hurt his feet so badly that he recalls the incident in the book after many years. And what does that prove? It proves everything. Says Browder: "Let each amateur Freudian give his own analysis of this interesting paragraph. Our own analysis is that Trotsky's ruling idea, from the time he met Lenin, was connected in one way or another with occupying Lenin's shoes." What mud could be clearer?

Mike "Arrives"

After all this it might be well to let the matter rest. But the review of Mike Gold remains, and who can ignore him? Mike has "arrived", so to speak, and success has made him bold. He thinks he can get away with anything—even plagiarism. There has to be some honor, among writers as well as among thieves, and DeWitt has a just ground to complain at the way Gold has stolen his stuff on Trotsky and has passed it off as his own.

An example: "One point that struck me in Trotsky's autobiography. What Luciferian pride in every line!... Trotsky is too convinced that he is a great man... But there are no supermen. All men are fallible," etc. That's clever, but DeWitt said it first. Why not give him credit?

Another example: "Trotsky writes of the revolution as a chess player might, or a general." And—believe it or not—"He has no feeling for the pathos, the poetry and human beauty of the proletarian masses." This is more literary larceny against which DeWitt may rightly protest. These quotations are the core of Gold's review, and they are lifted bodily, almost literally, from "The Chatter Box". This thing can't go on. For the good of the profession, literary ethics must be observed and swiping the other fellow's stuff must be cut out. Even if such a ruling would debar the *New Masses* from further parti-

cipation in the Trotsky discussion there would be nothing really lost. The *New Leader* will say it for them—and say it first.

The S.P.-Stalinist United Front

The fundamental similarity of the three reviews mentioned has its own meaning for those who look for the political content in literary polemics. It is quite possible that many will fail to see any significance in this united front and ask: "Are people not allowed to have the same opinions once in a while?" And to this we can answer: It is not only allowed; it is unavoidable when they approach questions from the same essential standpoint.

The common ground on the matter as issue of the social democratic philistine and the Stalinist Hessians of the pen only demonstrates how far the official Communist Party has departed from the Marxist method of analysis—the method which seeks the underlying social explanation of historic event and which sees persons—even the greatest as representatives of social forces.

We Oppositionists who fight under the banner of Marxism in the International are often reproached with merely being adherents of Trotsky in a personal struggle. But it is precisely the Oppositionists who protest against such an interpretation of the cleavage in the Party. The struggle of the Opposition against the reaction in the Soviet Union is no more a mere fight of persons for power than was the struggle of the Bolsheviks against Kerensky. In each case the philistines and reactionaries saw only the persons fighting for place, while the Marxists sought to explain the causal social factors and their potent manifestations.

Trotsky applies this scientific method to his entire book about all stages of the Russian revolution up to the present moment. The failure of DeWitt, Browder and Gold to grasp this issue and meet it condemns their interpretations to absolute worthlessness. They miss the point entirely and throw no light on the real questions at issue.

The worker who seeks an understanding of these questions must turn from the critics of Trotsky's book to the book itself. They will find it there.

World Union Membership Declines

AMSTERDAM—(FP)—Official statistics show the trade union membership in 76 countries as of Dec. 31, 1927 and 1928, as respectively 46,187,060, and 44,180,525. This great loss in one year is due to the collapse of the huge figures reported from Asia at the height of the Chinese revolution. For 1927 Asia reported 3,697,000 trade unionists, while in 1928 it reported only 724,194. Chiang Kai-Shek had crushed in blood the Chinese trade union movement which sprang up at the triumph of the revolution in 1927.

Europe reports at the end of 1927 a total of 33,936,784 trade unionists, while a year later its total had risen to 35,392,081. America confessed that while its 1927 total was 7,416,491, its 1928 total was only 6,947,296. Australia rose from 99,652 to 1,018,299. Africa fell from 144,33 to 90,497.

Trade unionism in the United States showed an increase, but in Mexico and other Latin-American countries a loss was registered. European countries making gains in that year—1928—were Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Luxemburg, Memel, Norway, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. Notable losses occurred in Greece, Great Britain, Lithuania, Poland and Portugal and less losses, in Belgium, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, France and Rumania.

«MY LIFE»

All readers of the *Militant*, and their friends, who desire to get their copy of Leon Trotsky, "My Life", should make it a point to order the book directly through the *Militant*. Shipment will be made the day the order is received, and the cost of the book, five dollars, (\$5.00), covers the postage charge. Send your order, together with money order or cash to

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