

BOOK REVIEW

Leon Trotsky on China

BY LEON TROTSKY

Reviewed by: F. Gilbert Chan, Miami University

This collection of Trotsky's writings on China, edited by Les Evans and Russell Block, is richer in quantity than Max Shachtman's *Problems of the Chinese Revolution* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1932). Besides reproducing the thirteen essays from Shachtman's volume, Evans and Block also include in their new collection fifty-three other selections. Twenty-two of these documents are published for the first time in English. They shed light on Trotsky's views on the Chinese revolution of 1925-1927, and the editors are justified in describing them as "indispensable" sources (p. 16). Based on these newly translated materials, Evans and Block try, with some success, to "correct a number of important errors in some standard accounts" by Isaac Deutscher, E.H. Carr, Benjamin I. Schwartz, and Fernando Claudin (pp. 21-26).

To help the general reader, Evans and Block use detailed notes to explain the circumstances under which the selected documents were written, as well as to analyze the Kuomintang-Communist collaboration in China and the Stalin-Trotsky rivalries in Russia. There is also a glossary which gives brief biographical sketches of such leaders as Li Ta-chao, Georgi Vasilyevich Chicherin, and Chiang Kai-shek.

The usefulness of these two sections, however, is severely reduced by inaccuracies, distortions, and over-simplifications. A few obvious examples are sufficient to illustrate these errors. According to Evans and Block, Ch'en Tu-hsiu "took part" in the 1911 Revolution (p. 656). They further claim that Sun Yat-sen joined the "anti-Manchu underground in 1893" and "lived in exile in Japan" after the failure of his 1895 uprising in Canton (p. 669). One is tempted to wonder if the two editors have adequate knowledge of twentieth-century China.

A major contribution of this volume is the publication of two important documents on the Trotskyist movement in China. The first is Ch'en Tu-hsiu's 1929 letter to his Chinese Communist comrades. In 1921-1927, Ch'en was the leader of the Communist Party in China. He became a prominent member of the Trotskyist opposition after his expulsion from the party in November 1929. His letter, dated December 10, 1929, gives a critical account of Stalin's "class-collaborationist policies." It has not been readily available to Western scholars.

The second document is a new essay written particularly for this volume and is therefore more significant than the first. For the same reason, it deserves closer scrutiny. Its author, Peng Shu-tse [P'eng Shu-chih], was one of the earliest converts to Communism in China. He too, turned to Trotskyism after being expelled from the party in 1929. His article is an unabashedly partisan study of the Chinese revolution of 1925-1927. It is pregnant with political rhetoric, often at the sacrifice of historical objectivity. As Peng insists, the Chinese Communists failed in 1927 because of "Stalin's opportunistic leadership. "Trotsky's views, on the other hand, "were proved completely correct by

the historical record” (p. 31). In his discussion of the aftermath of Chiang Kai-shek’s coup in April 1927, Peng argues with conviction: “If the Comintern had adopted Trotsky’s proposals and sent them on to China, the revolution might have been saved” (p. 70).

The above criticism of Peng’s essay is probably unfair, since he is clearly not interested in historical analysis. He writes to justify his support for a lost cause in the Chinese revolution. To him, Sun Yat-sen was a “representative of the bourgeoisie” (p. 45), with “reactionary anti-class-struggle views” (p. 52). The Three Principles of the People were “infantile” (p. 55). Peng also emphasizes “the experience and lesson” of the Russian revolutions (p. 81), even though the Communist victory of 1949 resulted partly from Mao Tse-tung’s revision of the Soviet “model” to meet the needs of China.

It is perhaps improper to quarrel with Peng over his interpretation of history. A reviewer is, nonetheless, obligated to note the many factual errors in the essay, which Evans and Block acclaim as “invaluable primary source material” (p. 28). For example, General Galen did not, as Peng suggests, help Chiang Kai-shek “establish” the Whampoa Military Academy (p. 45). The academy was founded in May 1924, while Galen did not arrive in Canton until October. Moreover, Mikhail Borodin did not return “from the Soviet Union” in April 1926 (p. 53). On February 3, he asked the Kuomintang Political Council for a leave of absence. He then left Canton with T’an P’ing-shan, a leading Communist, for North China. While he was there, he negotiated with Feng Yu-hsiang, the “Christian general,” and conferred with Andrei Bubnov, who was in Peking. His stay in the north was interrupted by Chiang Kai-shek’s March coup, and he returned to Canton on April 29. He did not go to Russia during these two and a half months.

A knowledgeable editor would have corrected some of these errors. It is disturbing, for instance, to find in the same essay two different translations--Central Committee (pp. 44, 45) and Central Executive Committee (pp. 72, 73, 74)--for the Kuomintang’s Chung-yang chih-hsing wei-yuan-hui. Yet, this is only a relatively minor point. Admittedly, Evans and Block deserve the credit for asking Peng to write an introduction to the volume. Despite its shortcomings, the essay is interesting. It gives a one-sided story of the Chinese revolution of 1925-1927. It is a useful supplement to Trotsky’s writings on China. Nevertheless, this is not enough. To enable the general reader to appreciate the value of Peng’s article, the editors should have presented in their preface a balanced account of the revolution by pointing out Peng’s prejudices and noting the revolutionary realities of China in the 1920’s. Their failure to do this constitutes the most serious weakness of the volume.