Was the Revolution Betrayed?

THE other day I received by post the latest issues of two Soviet journals *Kommunist* and *Voprosy Istorii*, together with an English paper-back edition of Leon Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*. It was enough to scan the two journals for a few moments to see how much the ghost of Trotsky is once again haunting the ruling circles of the USSR. *Kommunist* attacks Shepilov for the indulgence he has shown towards 'revisionists' in literature and the arts and says that Shepilov drew inspiration from Trotsky who allegedly held that writers and artists should avoid all political 'commitment.' The other journal, *Voprosy Istorii*, makes a fresh and rather feeble effort to exorcise Trotsky from the history of the Red Army and of the civil war, which is not as easy a job as it used to be in Stalin's days.

These new attempts to lay Trotsky's ghost do not alter the fact – indeed they confirm it – that a new generation of the Soviet intelligentsia are grappling with the significance of Trotsky's struggle against Stalin and with its relevance to the problems of the post-Stalin era. The issue of Trotsky's rehabilitation lurks behind some of the current political conflicts as well. The downfall of Molotov and Kaganovich has certainly brought the rehabilitation nearer. To be sure, Krushchev, who was a very zealous Stalinist for over 25 years, does not favour it; but he is no more likely to have the last say in this matter than Molotov and Kaganovich have had it.

What is involved here is not merely history or the rendering of posthumous justice to the reputation of a great revolutionary leader. If this were all, Trotsky would not occupy as much place in Soviet discussions as he does – 17 years after his assassination and 30 after his deportation from Moscow. The intelligentsia of Moscow, Warsaw, Prague, East Berlin (*vide* Harich's 'testament'), and perhaps even of Peking, are wondering whether they can learn anything from Trotsky. Do his writings convey any message to Communists who are freeing themselves from Stalinism and trying to shape an alternative to it?

Tito, Gomulka, Mao, and Krushchev have, each in his own way, provided some of the short-term practical answers to questions raised by de-Stalinisation. But none of them has provided any serious theoretical generalisation; none has offered a broader historical perspective; and none has even tried to explain the origins and the nature of Stalinism and to facilitate thereby the proper approach to its legacy. They have all been more lucky than Trotsky was in resisting Stalinism – they have resisted it during its decline. But of all Stalin's opponents Trotsky alone has produced a systematic and comprehensive *critique*.

In *The Revolution Betrayed* he offered the final version of that *critique*. He wrote the book in Norway in 1936, just before the Great Purges; and it has since become the bible of the latter-day Trotskyist sects and chapels. However, the work also made its impression far beyond these circles. In a curious way, it has been one of the most influential books of this century. Some of its ideas, torn out of context, have become widely popularised by a host of writers who have lived on crumbs (and not the best crumbs) from Trotsky's rich table. James Burnham, for instance, has based his *Managerial Revolution* on a few fragments of Trotsky's theory. *The Revolution Betrayed* re-echoes through much of Koestler's writing. Orwell was strongly impressed by it: the fragments of *The Book*, which take up so many pages in *1984*, are a paraphrase of *The Revolution Betrayed*, just as Emanuel Goldstein, the author of *The Book* and Big Brother's enigmatic antagonist, is modelled on Trotsky. Finally, some of the intellectually ambitious propagandists of the cold war have also drawn their arguments from this source.

Despite the adventitious use made if it, *The Revolution Betrayed* remains a classic of Marxist literature. There are admittedly various layers of thought in it: not all of them are of equal value and not all have stood the test of time equally well. But this is only natural. Trotsky's fertile mind grappled here with a vast, complex, and novel problem. He threw out various, sometimes contradictory, hypotheses; and he sought to facilitate analysis by means of somewhat shaky historical analogies. He dealt with his subject matter in his various capacities: as a detached and rigorously objective sociologist and analyst; as a fighter and exiled leader of a suppressed opposition; and as a passionate pamphleteer and polemicist. The polemicist's contribution, his brilliant anti-Stalinist invective, forms the more ephemeral and exoteric part of the work; but it has, naturally, tended to overshadow Trotsky's profound, strictly analytical argument.

Nothing is easier than to compile from this book a list of errors and false prognostications. Trotsky argued gravely that the Stalinist bureaucracy strove to abolish public ownership and that its members might soon become the share-holding owners of the Soviet industry—he even saw in the 'Stalin Constitution' of 1936 'the political premises' for such a change in property relations. He forecast that in the course of the second world war the collective farms would dissolve, the Soviet monopoly of foreign trade would collapse, and western (allied) capital would penetrate into Russia. He did not see how Stalin's Russia could emerge victorious, with its social structure intact, if the war was not brought to an end by proletarian revolutions *in the West*; and he was strangely confident that such revolutions would stop the second world war much more decisively and much earlier than they stopped the first.

But there is perhaps more to be learned even from Trotsky's mistakes than one can learn from the 'correct' platitudes of most political writers. Even his erroneous hypotheses and predictions contain important elements of truth and most often follow from premisses which retain full validity. He is in this respect not unlike Marx: his thought is 'algebraically' correct even when his 'arithmetical' conclusions are wrong. He overrated the 'bourgeois' element in the Stalinist bureaucracy; but he was absolutely justified in exposing it, and this at a time when so many 'friends of the Soviet Union' were utterly blind to it. His specific forecasts about revolutionary developments in the course of the second world war have been falsified by the events, largely because he viewed the second world war too much in terms of the first; but his general insights into the mutual relationship between war and revolution were deep and still offer the clues (but not more than the clues) to an understanding of the revolutionary aftermath of the second world war.

What gives to *The Revolution Betrayed* its weight as a document of our time is the masterly critical panorama of Stalinist society during its early and middle periods which Leon Trotsky drew here. While the polemicist denounces the plots of the bureaucracy and, above all, of Stalin, the sociologist sees Stalinism and its growth as a historical process determined by objective circumstances, by the isolation of the Russian revolution and the appalling poverty and backwardness of the environment in which the first 'workers' state' had set out to build Socialism:

> The justification for the existence of a Soviet state as an apparatus of compulsion lies in the fact that the present transitional structure is still full of social contradictions, which in the sphere of *consumption* – most close and sensitively felt by all – are extremely tense. . . .
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> The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there is enough goods in a store the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there is little goods the purchasers are compelled to queue up, when the queues are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. Such is the starting point of the power of the Soviet bureaucracy. It 'knows' who is to get something and who has to wait. . . . Thus out of a social necessity there has developed an organ which has far outgrown its socially necessary function, and become . . . the source of great danger . . . The poverty and cultural backwardness of the masses has again become incarnate in the malignant figure of the ruler with a great club in his hand . . .

Trotsky does not content himself with exposing inequality and bureaucratic domination against their peculiarly Russian background. From the experience of his time he draws a wider conclusion which may be read as a warning to Communists and Socialists everywhere: 'The tendencies of bureaucratism, which strangles the workers' movement in capitalist countries, would everywhere show themselves even after a proletarian revolution', although they are most unlikely to assume the barbarous forms they had assumed in Russia. He held that this danger was all the greater because inequality was bound to persist 'even in the most advanced countries, even in the United States' after a Socialist upheaval, for even American capitalism had not developed the nation's economic resources sufficiently to prepare the ground for an egalitarian society. This statement contradicts facile assumptions to the contrary which are widespread in Marxist literature; and it may serve as a starting point for a new Marxist analysis of the state of western capitalism and of Socialism.

An article in a weekly review cannot do justice to the wealth of ideas that are found in this book, to the burning Socialist faith that informs it, and to its imaginative force and literary *élan*. Some of Trotsky's conclusions are open to doubt. He certainly underrated to some extent the vitality that Socialist institutions and traditions retained even under the Stalinist regime and by implication also the reformist potentialities inherent in the Soviet Union. He insisted that the conflict between bureaucracy and workers cannot be resolved in a reformist manner and that it necessitated a new proletarian revolution, although he himself had most vigorously combated this view in the course of many years. Was he right in abandoning the reformist and adopting a 'revolutionary' attitude towards the Stalinist regime? Only further developments within the Soviet Union can provide the answer to this question. But history is already proving him profoundly right in this his inspired prophesy:

> . . . the actual establishment of a Socialist society can and will be achieved, not by these humiliating measures of a backward capitalism, to which the Soviet government is resorting, but by methods more worthy of a liberated humanity – and above all not under the whip of a bureaucracy. For this very whip is the most disgusting inheritance from

the old world. It will have to be broken in pieces and burned at a public bonfire before you can speak of Socialism without a blush of shame.

The whip is being broken into pieces. But how rarely do people, at any rate in the West, see it as 'the most disgusting inheritance from the old world' rather than as the 'inevitable' result of Communism or Socialism. Yet in this description of the 'whip' lies the crux of Trotsky's critique of Stalinism.

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