

Leon Trotsky Looks Back On His Stormy Life

The Exiled Soviet Leader Brings a Vivid Quality to the Story of a Career Dedicated to Revolution



Leon Trotsky.

From a Drawing
From *Life* by
Cesare

sisted" Paris, he tells us, feeling quite naturally, that in order to understand it he "would have to spend a great deal of mental energy" at the expense of other things.

The same spirit of resistance characterized his early relations with Lenin, whom he met first in London in 1902. A powerful fundamental attraction drew the two men together, and Trotsky's treatment of Lenin throughout the book is marked by profound respect and regard; but in both the theory and practice of revolution the two were long in reaching common ground. It was the moment when the great controversy between what, for want of better terms, may be called the radical and liberal groups of the revolutionary Social Democracy, later to become the majority and minority groups of Bolsheviki and Mensheviki, was agitating the party and threatening permanent disruption. Between Trotsky and Lenin there were repeated disagreements, as there continued to be throughout Lenin's life, although more, it would seem, over ways and means than because of any ineradicable diversity of view.

Trotsky, who appears to have felt that success depended upon a united front, spent most of the year 1904 in vain attempts to reconcile the two party factions, meantime keeping in touch with Lenin and adding to his own influence by lectures and travel. The tragedy of Bloody Sunday, Jan. 22, 1905, when thousands of workers who had marched to the Winter Palace at St. Petersburg to present a petition to the Czar were shot down by troops, brought Trotsky to a point where he felt compelled to act alone. He reached St. Petersburg when the October strike was at its peak. In the strike of the workers, he writes, "the revolutionary leadership of the proletariat revealed itself as an incontrovertible fact. I felt that the theory of permanent revolution had withstood its first test successfully."

The revolution of 1905 was only "the dress rehearsal for the revolution of 1917," and before the year was over Trotsky was in prison and, fifteen months later, once more en route to Siberia. The account which the autobiography gives of his thrilling escape corrects the story as given in his book entitled "1905," since to have published the whole truth earlier would have betrayed his accomplices. Unable to remain at St. Petersburg, he went to Finland, and for the next ten years was a wanderer, busy with pen and tongue, preparing the way for the next step in revolt. He passed part of the time in Germany, Austria and England, spent the year 1912-13 in the Balkan countries, as in Paris at the end of 1914 as war correspondent for a Russian paper, was expelled from France in September, 1916, through Russian influence; was imprisoned in Spain and then deported, and reached New York in January, 1917, where he remained

for a few weeks, and then, by way of Sweden and Finland, made his way back to Russia to throw himself once more into a revolution.

The record of these years as an émigré contains much information about Trotsky's relations with his friends and supporters, and a wealth of caustic comment upon prominent personages whose political radicalism was commonly pictured, in conservative circles, as extreme and dangerous. At the party conference in London, in 1907, he met Gorky for the first time and renewed his acquaintance with Rosa Luxemburg. The German Social Democracy depressed him greatly, the Austrian only a little less so. At Berlin he met Ramsay MacDonald at a café, Hilferding asking questions, Eduard Bernstein acting as interpreter and MacDonald answering. "Today I do not remember either the questions or the answers; they were distinguished only by their triteness. I asked myself which of these three men stood furthest from what I had been accustomed to call socialism. And I was at a loss for an answer."

The Austrian Socialists Otto Bauer, Max Adler and Karl Renner seemed to Trotsky to represent "the type that was furthest from that of the revolutionary," and he fancied that he detected philistinism "in the quality of their voices." Kautsky, the popularizer of Marxism, could interpret the Russian revolution of 1905 "fairly well—from afar," but Bebel "personified the slow and stubborn movement of a new class that was rising from below." Liebknecht he admired, but he was disappointed to find that Radek did not believe in the possibility of a proletarian revolution in connection with the war.

"Everything was topsyturvy" in France as far as the French Socialist party was concerned, and Trotsky holds up the party leaders to scorn. Jean Longuet, "with a certain diffidence which he passed off for extreme radicalism," had ways which were "a constant reminder that Marx was not responsible for his grandsons." (Longuet was a grandson of Marx). Hervé was a "revolutionary buffoon," and Renaudel became for a time the head of the party because, "after all, somebody had to occupy the place left vacant by Jaurès."

"Of the legends that have sprung up about me," Trotsky writes, the greater number have to do with my life in New York. In Norway, which I only touched in passing, the resourceful journalists had me working as a codfish cleaner. In New York, where I stayed for two months, the newspapers had me engaged in any number of occupations, each more fantastic than the one before.

As a matter of fact, he notes, his only occupation was that of "a revolutionary socialist," a profession at that time "no more reprehensible than that of a bootlegger." He wrote and lectured, and in the libraries studied the economic history of the United States. For the American Socialists and their leaders the autobiography speaks only in withering contempt, and the pacifists fare no better: "It is a well-known axiom that pacifists think of war as an enemy only in time of peace."

Trotsky was back in Petrograd in May, 1917. The second half of his book is devoted almost entirely to a detailed narrative of his part in the revolution, his relations with Lenin, his work as Commissary of Foreign Affairs and later of War, and the long intrigue which ended

(Continued on Page 12)

order," and that he "cannot endure disorder or destruction." There is much in the autobiography to bear him out, yet it would be hard to find a man of equal prominence now living whose life has been so crammed with adventure and crisis.

He was 19 years old and had been out of school only a year, when he was first arrested for revolutionary activities. Four years in two periods were spent in Czarist prisons and upward of two years in exile in Siberia. About twelve years have been passed in foreign countries, including the United States, as a political émigré, ten of those years continuously after the failure of the Revolution of 1905. He was condemned in absentia to imprisonment in Germany, expelled from France and Spain (the order of expulsion from France is still technically in force), interned in Nova Scotia, and deported to Constantinople. He took part in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, was chairman of the St. Petersburg Soviet in both years, conducted the peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk as People's Commissary of Foreign Affairs, had charge of the organization of the Red Army and the restoration of the navy, and for a year took over the administration of the disorganized Russian railways. The present Soviet Government sent him into exile at the beginning of 1928, but he had spent a year on the Chinese frontier before, in 1929, he was deported to Turkey. Yet he reminds us that "the main content" of his life, save

during the Civil War in Russia, "has been party and literary activity," that he has literally lived with a pen in his hand, and that thirteen volumes of his writings, not counting five early volumes on military subjects, were brought out by the State Publishing House down to 1927 when "Trotskyism" came in for persecution and publication ceased.

Across his record, so obviously, it would seem that of a born revolutionary, is drawn a curious thread of intellectual resistance. Trotsky's first plunge into revolution, taken while he was still a schoolboy at Odessa, seems to have been inspired in part by his observation of the hard life of peasants and small farmers in the remote country district in which the first nine years of his life were spent, in part by the forbidden books which he contrived to read at school, and in part by the revolutionary spirit which grew apace in Russia after the terrorist plots against Alexander II. Yet his mind, if we may accept his own judgment in the matter, appears to have been one that needed to be not only convinced, but conquered. He found Marxism absorbingly interesting, but he did not immediately become a thick and thin Marxist. It was at Paris, oddly enough, that he first felt an interest in nature, and his study of art while there, although it never carried him beyond the dilettante stage, widened his intellectual horizon, but he nevertheless felt himself in opposition. He "re-

MY LIFE. An Attempt at an Autobiography. By Leon Trotsky. 599 pp. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$5.

By WILLIAM MacDONALD

TROTSKY frankly disclaims any intention of writing an autobiography which should be "a mere daguerreotype" of his life. The record which he has set down, he tells us, is

not a dispassionate photograph of my life * * * but a component part of it. In these pages I continue the struggle to which my whole life is devoted. Describing, I also characterize and evaluate; narrating, I also defend, and more often attack.

What he is defending, aside from various incidental performances by the way, is his so-called theory of permanent revolution, a theory which he sees acquiring "poignant reality in the countries of the East." What he is attacking is the enemies, some within Russia, but many without, who opposed the theory or sought to sidetrack it, and those in particular who succeeded in compassing his political downfall.

Neither attack nor defense, however, notwithstanding the considerable part which each plays as the story unfolds, interferes very much with the straightforward narrative of events. Whatever may be thought of Trotsky as a theorist or a revolutionary, there is no denying his unusual literary powers, and the vivid experiences which have filled his life give him an opportunity to show his literary abilities at their best. From the opening chapters which describe his childhood and youth to the final pages in which he pays his respects to enemies and friends from his exile in Constantinople, the narrative does not lag.

It is a little surprising to find Trotsky remarking in his preface, after a striking passage in which he briefly summarizes the main events of his career, that while the outward course of his life is hardly to be called monotonous, he has "by natural inclination * * * nothing in common with seekers after adventure," that he is, on the contrary, "rather pedantic and conservative" in his habits, that he likes and appreciates "discipline and

Trotsky's Life

(Continued from Page 5)

in his downfall and exile. Here may be found, in more than 250 lively pages studded with brilliant passages, "close-up" pictures of the Petrograd Soviet, the rise and fall of the Provisional Government, the reading of radio messages from the Eiffel Tower at Paris and the broadcasting of replies to Clemenceau's attacks. Life as an army commander in an armored train or in automobiles, the conclusion of the Brest-Litovsk treaty which the Russians signed without reading, the defense of Petrograd and the repulse of the White army under Yudenich, and the strenuous efforts which Trotsky declares he made to avoid war with Poland.

There were repeated disagreements with Lenin, though not to the point of rupture, the most serious having to do with the new economic policy, against which, when first brought forward in 1920, Lenin "came out firmly." It is not easy to follow in the autobiography Lenin's part in the events which Stalin and others used to unhorse Trotsky, but the intrigues appear at least as early as 1919 in criticism of the organization of the Red Army, and continued with disputes over war strategy. Stalin, whose "moral yellowness" is bitterly displayed, appears as the leader of a bureaucracy in which "the revolt against the exacting theoretical demands of Marxism and the exacting political demands of the revolution gradually assumed * * * the form of a struggle against 'Trotskyism.'" Under this banner the liberation of the philistine in the Bolshevik was proceeding." Lenin "from his deathbed," Trotsky declares, was preparing a blow at Stalin. If the "epigones," as Trotsky calls them, think to find in the documents any evidence of distrust on Lenin's part of Trotsky's loyalty, they will find only Lenin's will "in which Stalin himself is referred to as a disloyal man, capable of abuse of power."

Trotsky was at Tiflis, ill, when he learned of Lenin's death. A year later, in January, 1925, he was relieved of his post as Commissary of War. In 1927 he was exiled to Central Asia, where, between April and October, 1928, he sent out about 800 political letters and 550 telegrams and received some thousand letters and 700 telegrams. In December he was ordered to "stop directing the opposition," and in January was deported to Constantinople. In one of his bitterest passages he flays the leaders of the British Labor party whose government refused him a visa to visit England.

Trotsky looks back over his variegated years with mingled hopefulness and detachment. He is still a revolutionist, and revolution must still go on. It is "a miracle of its kind" that "a backward and isolated Russia twelve years after the revolution has been able to insure for the masses of the people a standard of living that is not lower than that existing on the eve of the war." But that is not the significance of the October revolution. "The revolution is an experiment in a new social régime, an experiment that will undergo many changes and will probably be remade anew from its very foundations. It will assume an entirely different character on the basis of the newest technical achievements." As for himself,

I do not measure the historical process by the yardstick of one's personal fate. On the contrary, I appraise my fate objectively and live it subjectively, only as it is inextricably bound up with the course of social development.

"I know," he writes, "no personal tragedy. I know the changes of two chapters of the revolution."

The New York Times

Published: April 20, 1930

Copyright © The New York Times