

Isaac Deutscher 1948

Trotsky on Stalin

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Trotsky's 'appraisal' of Stalin is one of the tragic documents in modern literature. The contemporary reader cannot yet look either at the hero of this book or at its author in the perspective of history, and hence it is not easy to define its value as a document. The train of events, to which the feud of the two men belongs, has not yet run its full course. Even the publication of the book has, regardless of its author's intentions, become a minor incident in the contemporary controversy between East and West. The book was ready for publication in the United States as early as 1941. It was then withheld from print by the American publishers, in deference to the leader of a mighty allied nation. It first saw the light (in the United States) only in 1946, after the Foreign Secretaries of the former allies had fallen out, and opinion had made the remarkable swing from wartime admiration of Russia to acute peacetime suspicion. Thus Trotsky's testimony is being used for discrediting Stalin. *Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli.* [1]

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This adventitious use of the book makes it the more necessary to attempt its criticism as a historical document, and nothing else. Imagine that Danton, after his conviction, had been given a lease of life which enabled him to write a biography of Robespierre. His evidence would certainly have influenced posterity's judgement on Robespierre. Yet it is doubtful whether posterity would have accepted that evidence wholly as it stood.

Such an analogy – if an imaginary one – is as imperfect as any comparison drawn between two real and historic situations. Stalin is, and is not, the Robespierre of Bolshevism. In the actual making of the revolution his role was incomparably slighter – the title of the Russian Robespierre goes not to Stalin but to Lenin. It is in the post-revolutionary era that Stalin has loomed just as large, or even larger, than Robespierre; he has even combined his traits with those of the First Consul. On the other hand, Trotsky's resemblance to Danton will hardly be disputed. Both represented the same type of revolutionary leadership, oratorical genius and tactical brilliance. Both gave expression to

the whole *élan* of a revolution so long as popular enthusiasm was its chief motive force and both suffered eclipse when that enthusiasm ebbed away.

If, at times, Stalin appears to combine some traits of Robespierre with some of Bonaparte, in Trotsky also two characters at least seem to have blended – Danton's and Babeuf's. Only a few years after his resounding triumphs the universally acclaimed tribune of the people was already the hunted leader of a new Conspiracy of Equals, raising the cry for the regeneration of the revolution and defying the implacable builders of a half-revolutionary and half-conservative empire. The tide of history ran against Trotsky as powerfully as it had run against Babeuf.

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What Trotsky's publishers have now produced is not a biography but an indictment of Stalin. It is a book that bears all the marks of the tremendous nervous pressure under which its author lived his last tragic years. When he wrote it he had behind him more than ten years of a frustrating isolation from the world, ten years in the course of which he wandered uneasily, in constant danger of sudden death, from one uncertain asylum to another. He was oppressed by the nightmare of the Moscow purge trials, in which he had been depicted as the centre of a most sinister conspiracy. All his children had died in mysterious circumstances which led him to believe that they had fallen victims to Stalin's vengeance. Finally, while he was still working on this book, on 20 August 1940, he was struck down by an assassin, who presumably was carrying out a verdict passed in Moscow. Only the first seven chapters were finished by him. The others were pieced together from his notes and edited, though not always in strict accordance with Trotsky's trend of thought. Trotsky would have protested against Mr Malamuth's phrase, 'the trend towards centralisation, that sure precursor of totalitarianism' or against his description of Marshal Pilsudski as 'Poland's Liberator'. Small wonder, therefore, that this posthumous book lacks the sweep and brilliance which distinguished his monumental *History of the Russian Revolution*. As a piece of writing it is disappointingly inchoate and at times incoherent. Even so, it must be said that many of its pages are illumined by flashes of genius, epigrams and sayings that may go down to history:

'Of Christ's twelve apostles [says Trotsky on page 416, referring to the purge trials] Judas alone proved to be a traitor. But if he had acquired power, he would have represented the other eleven apostles as traitors, and also all the lesser apostles, whom Luke numbers as seventy.

And this is how Trotsky sums up his indictment of Stalin:

'*L'État, c'est moi*' is almost a liberal formula by comparison with the actualities of Stalin's totalitarian regime. Louis XIV identified himself only with the state. The Popes of Rome identified themselves with both the state and the church – but only during the epoch of temporal power. The totalitarian state goes far beyond Caesaro-Papism, for it has encompassed the entire economy of the country as well. Stalin can justly say, unlike the *Roi Soleil*, '*La Société, c'est moi*'.

In the conflict of the two men, principles, ideas and policies were at stake; but the conflict of temperaments was not less important. Two so extremely contrasting personalities would have clashed in any party, in any circumstances. Stalin's mind is shrewd, strictly practical, cautious and pedestrian. Only in an atmosphere overcharged with revolution like that of Tsarist Russia could so cautious a mind as his be attracted by the Marxian doctrine. Where his actions have the sweep of the boldest social experimentation they reflect less the qualities of that mind than the extraordinary pressures of a revolution which compel a most circumspect leader to jump over precipices, in a neck-breaking manner. As a rule, Stalin makes such jumps *contre-coeur*, when the situation in which he finds himself allows neither retreat nor advance by any normal way. Thus in many ways this most adventurous of contemporary statesmen at heart fears and abhors adventure. His inclinations are those of the stickler for the 'middle of the road', for 'safety first', even though events have consistently thrown him off the middle of the road, now towards one and now towards another most unsafe extreme. Feared by conservatives as the very embodiment of revolution, he himself has been a conservative in the revolution.

Not so Trotsky. Revolution was his proper element. He had been drawn to it by his temperament and outlook. The dialectical philosophy, which views life as the continuous conflict of opposites, continuous change and movement, was to him not merely a doctrine to be intellectually absorbed – it permeated his instinctive behaviour. While Stalin distrusts generalisations, Trotsky was in constant search for them. Stalin may often miss the wood for the trees. Trotsky had little or no interest for trees that would not make a wood. There is no end to such contrasts. Stalin shows an absolute lack of artistic sense and imagination; he relies exclusively on his solid mechanics of power. In Trotsky the artist was as strong as the political leader; he is obviously sincere when he confesses in his autobiography that he 'felt the mechanics of power as an inescapable burden rather than as a spiritual satisfaction'. He was ebullient, eloquent, generous and picturesque, while Stalin's main characteristics are cool reserve, taciturnity and suspiciousness. Trotsky was the *émigré* steeped in Western European culture, while Stalin breathed the air of Russia only. Small wonder that from their very first personal contact there was suspicion between them. Trotsky recalls the 'yellow glint' of animosity which he noticed in Stalin's eyes during their first conversation in Vienna, in 1913. From the beginning he treated Stalin with the contempt that he never abandoned for a moment while he was writing this book.

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Trotsky's bitterness towards Stalin is unlimited. Yet the statement that bitterness too often directed his pen must be qualified. As an historian and biographer, Trotsky treats facts, dates and quotations with almost pedantic conscientiousness. Where he goes wrong is in the constructions put on the facts; he errs in his inferences and guesses. Not rarely his evidence is based on dubious hearsay. To this category belongs his dark, vague and self-contradictory suggestion that Stalin, in his striving for power, may have speeded up Lenin's death. Yet the historian's conscience, as a rule, does make him draw a clear line of distinction between the facts and his own constructions and guesses, so that the discriminating reader is able to sift the enormous biographical material and form his own opinions.

English readers may find the book's method of exposition extremely wearisome, repetitive and pedantic. The author delves with unrelenting suspicion into every detail of his adversary's life. Armed with a formidable array of quotations and documents, he polemises at great length. He often expresses agreement or disagreement with Stalin's other biographers, many of whom hardly deserve to be taken seriously, and it is pathetic that this great political and literary warrior should turn all his big guns on the hares and rabbits roaming the field in front of him.

He was not, however, writing his book with an eye to any English-speaking, or other Western, public. Nor was he greatly interested in its immediate success. Rather, in his thoughts, he addressed a Russian public whom he hoped his words would eventually reach, not, perhaps, in his lifetime: a new Russian generation inured from its cradle to the cult of Stalin and brought up on histories of the revolution, from which Trotsky's name and all that it stood for had been carefully expunged. It was for the benefit of this generation that he set out, step by step, to destroy the Stalinist cult, to reassert his own role in the revolution, and to restate what he regarded as the pristine principles of Bolshevism. The future will show whether his labour was lost or not. In ten or twenty years his *Stalin* may become a great spiritual experience for the Russian intelligentsia, a stimulus for some sweeping, unpredictable 'transvaluation of values'. A new Russian generation may find in Trotskyism (side by side with an obviously conservative and quixotic attempt to put the clock of Russian history back to 1917) a starting-point for a new trend of ideas, just as the progenitors of French socialism found such a starting-point in Babeuf.

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Nevertheless, the weakness of Trotsky's indictment is not difficult to see. It appears clearly in, for example, the following passages from page 336:

This fundamental dissimilarity [between Stalin and the Fascist dictators] is illustrated... by the uniqueness of Stalin's career by comparison with the careers of... Mussolini and Hitler, each the initiator of a movement, each an exceptional agitator, a popular tribune. Their political rise, fantastic though it seems, proceeded on its own momentum in full view of all, in unbreakable connection with the growth of the movements they headed... Altogether different was the nature of Stalin's rise. It is not comparable with anything in the past. He seems to have no pre-history. The process of his rise took place somewhere behind an impenetrable political curtain. At a certain moment his figure, in the full panoply of power, suddenly stepped away from the Kremlin wall, and for the first time the world became aware of Stalin as a ready-made dictator...

The current official comparisons of Stalin to Lenin are simply indecent. If the basis of comparison is sweep of personality, it is impossible to place Stalin even alongside Mussolini or Hitler. However meagre the 'ideas' of Fascism, both the victorious leaders of reaction, the Italian and the German, from the beginning of their respective movements, displayed initiative, roused the masses to action, pioneered new paths through the political jungle. Nothing of the kind can be said about Stalin.

These words, written while Russia was entering into the second decade of planned economy – that is, several years after the collectivisation of twenty-odd million farms – had a sufficiently unreal ring even eight or nine years ago; today they sound fantastic. Trotsky's view of Stalin is coloured by the familiar but unwise contempt of an original thinker and man of letters for a greyish, dullish but yet very powerful man of action. Trotsky underrated his adversary so much that he came to see Stalin's figure, like a *deus ex machina*, 'suddenly stepping away from the Kremlin wall, in the full panoply of power'. But Stalin did not come to the fore like that. It is clear from Trotsky's own revelations that ever since the October Revolution Stalin was one of the very few (the three or five) men who exercised power; and that his practical, though not ideological, influence in the ruling group was second only to Lenin's and Trotsky's.

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It was not only Stalin's personality which Trotsky underrated. He underrated also the depth and strength of the social developments which had brought Stalin to the fore, though he himself had been the first to interpret those very developments to the world. He viewed Stalin as the leader of a 'Thermidorian reaction' from the revolution, the chief of a

new bureaucratic hierarchy, the originator of a new nationalist trend epitomised in Socialism In One Country. Throughout the 1920s and the 1930s he blamed Stalin's leadership for all the defeats that communism suffered all over the world. In these criticisms there was truth, especially in his devastating criticisms of the Comintern's policies in Germany on the eve of the Nazi era. But the sum total of his charges betrays a degree of 'subjectivism' in Trotsky which is at cross-purposes with his Marxian method of analysis. In his conception Stalin appears almost as the demiurge, the evil demiurge, of contemporary history, the one man whose vices have dominated the fortunes of international revolution. At this point Trotsky's polemics smack less of Marx than of Carlyle.

Was Stalin the leader of the Soviet Thermidor? In France the Thermidorian reaction put an end to the Terror. It did not undo the economic and social work of the revolution, but it brought that work to a stop. After Thermidor no major change occurred in the social structure of France as it had been so far wrought by the revolution. The political power moved from the *plebs* to the *bourgeois* Directory. In Russia, however, the social revolution did not come to a stop with Stalin's rise to power. On the contrary, its most comprehensive and radical acts, the expropriation and collectivisation of all individual farmers, the initiation of planned economy, took place only after Stalin's ascendancy.

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There is much more truth in Trotsky's other charge that Stalin came forward as the leader of a new bureaucracy which had risen above the people. Against the rigid, totalitarian outlook of Stalin's hierarchy Trotsky invoked the programme of Soviet democracy – that is, of government by the revolutionary people – which the Bolsheviks had advanced when they seized power. Here the precedent of his argument is unmistakable to the historian: under the Directory Babeuf advocated the return to the Jacobin Constitution of 1793. However, government by the revolutionary people was as impossible in Russia in 1925 or 1930 as it had been in France in 1797. The revolutionary masses had spent their political energy in the civil war and played out their role. The 'heroic' phase of the revolution had given place to weariness and apathy; the nation's progress could no longer be prompted by impulses coming from below, but only by direction from above. So far the analogy between Stalin's regime and the Thermidorian reaction is correct.

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What Trotsky understated was the extent to which the change from ‘Soviet democracy’ to ‘bureaucratic control’ had occurred in the Leninist period. He distinguishes between the two phases of the revolution, but is reluctant fully to admit connection between them. It is true that Leninism was essentially non-totalitarian; but it is also true that by the end of the civil war (say, 1920 and 1921) it had, under the pressure of events, gradually, gropingly, almost unconsciously evolved towards totalitarianism. The birth of Bolshevik totalitarianism can be traced, with a high degree of precision, to the Tenth Congress of the party in 1921. It was on the foundations laid by the 1921 congress that Stalin built up his regime in later years. Both Lenin and Trotsky thought of going back to a more democratic order; but it may be doubted whether, even if Lenin had lived longer, they would have been able to do so. Leaving aside the contemporary Fascist counter-revolutions, which have been predominantly political in character and totalitarian *a priori*, no historic social revolution – Cromwellian, Jacobin or Bolshevik – has escaped the phase of ‘totalitarian degeneration’.

It is the main count in Trotsky’s indictment that Stalin gave up world revolution for Socialism In One Country. To non-Marxists the dispute over this point between Trotskyism and Stalinism looks like a scholastic squabble, even if the heads of many Bolshevik leaders have rolled in the course of it. Yet, it was more than that. What in fact divided the two antagonists was not that the one ‘wanted’ and the other ‘did not want’ world revolution, but a fundamental difference in their estimate of the revolutionary potential of the working classes in the Western countries.

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Underlying Trotskyism was the firm belief that at least Europe was ‘ripe for socialism’. This was the thesis that had been enunciated by Karl Kautsky, the ‘Pope’ of international social democracy, at the beginning of the century. From this standpoint the Russian Revolution was the prelude to a far wider upheaval. In Trotsky’s eyes the achievements of Socialist construction in Russia alone ranked little in comparison with the grand crescendo of material prosperity, cultural advance and spiritual freedom which could be expected from a socialist economy based and planned on a European scale. Trotsky was convinced that European capitalism had lost its vitality, and that, at heart, the European working classes were willing to give up the meretricious benefits of reformism in favour of revolution. Wherever the capitalist order succeeded in achieving a measure of stabilisation, either by means of Fascist surgery or by mild reformist cure, the blame, in Trotsky’s eyes, lay on the shoulders of communist or social democratic leadership. He often argued that even were the victory of socialism in Europe still to be remote, it was nevertheless closer than the achievement of a truly socialist, classless society in ‘backward, uncivilised’ Russia. He regarded Russia as upon a periphery of modern civilisation. That

periphery, to be sure, contained a powerful force; it was the pioneer of socialism. But eventually the forms of the new society would not be forged upon the periphery but in the centre of modern civilisation.

Upon this aspect of affairs Stalin has never formulated his mind very explicitly. First he lacks Trotsky's gift for the exposition of ideas; but, more significantly, his attitude marks a departure from Marxian tradition. Thus his real, though quasi-esoteric view, has merely been implied in his doctrine of Socialism In One Country. He never shared Trotsky's optimism concerning Europe's 'ripeness' for socialism, but estimated the powers of resistance left in the capitalist order as, on the whole, still very formidable. In the many crises of international politics between the wars – for example, the British crisis of 1926, the rise of Nazism in Germany, the Popular Front in France, and the civil war in Spain – Stalin was much less sanguine than Trotsky regarding the receptiveness of the working classes to the ideas of proletarian revolution. To Stalin his peculiar brand of socialism in Russia was, and still is, of incomparably greater importance than the possibility of socialism in the West. He declined to regard Russia as existing upon a peripheral area of modern civilisation, and was confident that Russia was destined to become the citadel of the new socialist civilisation. It was Stalin's plan to build up and safeguard that citadel, even if the means used for that purpose clashed (as, for example, the Russo-German pact of 1939), or seemed to clash, with the interests of foreign working classes. While Trotsky thought in terms of a double impact, first of Russia upon the West and then of the socialist West upon Russia, Stalin sees in Russia's one-sided impact upon the West the primary and decisive factor in the fortunes of communism or socialism.

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The doctrines of Trotsky and Stalin both view contemporary history as a worldwide rivalry between capitalism and socialism, a rivalry historically as legitimate as was the old struggle between the feudal and the bourgeois systems of society. Stalin has, on balance, been inclined to rely on a peaceful development of that rivalry as allowing growth and consolidation of the Russian citadel of socialism. Trotsky laid stress upon its 'cataclysmic' forms and emphasised, especially, the 'pressure of the capitalist world', under which the edifice of Russian socialism might perhaps collapse long before it had been completed. In addition, that edifice, built as it had been on narrow and shaky foundations in a 'backward, semi-Asiatic' country, was, in his view, so dangerously misshapen as in many respects to be a caricature of socialism.

Ever since the controversy began, nearly a quarter of a century ago, events have submitted the two antagonistic doctrines of communism to continual test. The controversy is unconcluded though it is no longer thrashed out in the ranks of communism, for

Trotsky's Fourth International has been stillborn. But indirectly the tenets of Stalinism and Trotskyism are being submitted to new tests at the conference tables of international diplomacy and in the social turmoil of Europe and Asia.

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On the showing of these tests, Stalin's scepticism regarding the revolutionary temper of the European working classes has so far seemed better justified than Trotsky's confidence. To be sure, that temper has as often been damped as it has been stimulated by Stalin's policies. But this is no answer to the fundamental problem. No social class with a real and significant momentum of its own will allow itself to be diverted from its essential objectives by any outside influence. If Trotsky's view that the influence of Moscow had acted as the decisive brake on European revolution were correct, it would merely testify to the relative weakness of the revolutionary proletarian element in Western Europe. Moreover, Russia can no longer be regarded today as upon the periphery of Europe. Much of Europe has, on the contrary, become peripheral to Russia. This radical shift in the international balance of power alone may be held by some to vindicate, in terms of communism, the Stalinist doctrine.

But from the standpoint of the Marxist, the Trotskyist argument has by no means been finally disposed of. There still remains the problem of Stalin's regime, on the origins of which Trotsky's posthumous work has shed keen, if one-sided, illumination. Can that regime, with its leader's implicit maxim, '*La Société, c'est moi*', really lead the Russian people to a free and classless society? Or will that regime continue, as Trotsky feared, to 'degenerate', until it turns into an unequivocal negation of socialism? Or will it, as he sometimes forecast, eventually clash with the non-communist world, seek salvation in the spread of revolution or perish? To these questions history has yet to give its answer.

Notes

1. *Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli* – according to the capabilities of the reader, books have their destiny, a line from Terentianus Maurus's poem *De litteris, De syllabis, De Metris* – MIA.

[Isaac Deutscher Archive](https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1948/trotsky-stalin.htm)