

# Leon Trotsky and the Fate of Marxism in the USSR

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I am very grateful to the organisers of this lecture for giving me the opportunity to lecture at this beautiful university.

Today we will be speaking about one of the most outstanding figures of the twentieth century. We will be discussing his ideas and his personality, which to this very day still provoke contradictory responses.

Every great revolution changes the moral and intellectual climate within a country, and, as Lenin once pointed out, brings forth new talents and new forces which earlier would not have been thought possible.

I can name dozens of leading figures from the October Revolution who, by the many-sidedness of their talents and their abilities, could be favourably compared with people from the epoch of the Renaissance.

During the Civil War of 1919-21 they were able to lead the Red Army and conquer the White Armies led by former Czarist professional officers, who were supplied with equipment and material from foreign powers.

After the war, they became the most able economic organisers. They headed many areas of social life, including intellectual and cultural areas of the most varied types.

But even against the background of such outstanding people, the figure of Trotsky stands out most of all, both by the power and the many-sidedness of his talents.

He was the organiser of the Red Army and was responsible for many of its victories. He displayed enormous capabilities in diplomacy when he confronted the leaders of many foreign countries and was highly respected for his ability. He was able to direct, and direct very effectively, whole branches of the Soviet economy.

He was also a great public speaker and was able to lift up and inspire whole audiences. There were many eye-witnesses to his speeches. The Menshevik historian Sukhanov relates how he was present during a speech that Trotsky gave. The speech lasted several hours at the famous Cirque Moderne in Petrograd during 1917. Trotsky concluded his speech by saying, "Let us devote the last drop of our blood and all of our life-force to the victory of the socialist revolution".

Everyone in the audience raised their hands in unison and vowed to give the last drop of their blood.

Much to his own amazement, Sukhanov, who did not share Trotsky's views politically, realised later as was walking down the street, that he too had raised his hand and vowed to devote his life to the revolution.

During the Civil War, as head of the Red Army, Trotsky not only discussed his ideas with other members of the Red Army but also with deserters. An episode in which Trotsky addressed a group of deserters is clearly described in a novel by the Russian writer Aksyonov.

He retells a story that was passed on to him by his father, an old Bolshevik who later spent about 20 years in Soviet camps.

The character in the novel, based on his father, describes how he was once a member of the guard supervising a large group of deserters who were held in an open field.

Then Trotsky's train arrived. Trotsky used to travel from front to front during the Civil War on the train. Of course at the beginning of the 1960s, Aksyonov was not able to name Trotsky by name in the novel. He just said that a highly-placed Moscow commissar arrived.

Trotsky stood on a shaky platform that had been set up and began to address the rag-tag group of deserters. He was greeted with many angry shouts. They told him to get out of there. "You sent us to the lice and the trenches, down with you, get out of here," they shouted.

The commissar Trotsky cut them short as they were shouting. He said, "Why are the guards here? Remove the guards. These are not bourgeois scum, these are Red Army fighters."

The deserters were so surprised by the way Trotsky began his speech that they immediately fell silent.

Trotsky then delivered a speech with many powerful slogans saying, "Victory will soon be ours, we are defeating Denikin and we will continue to do this on all fronts."

As Trotsky continued, there were more and more shouts of hurrah and shouts of support. The soldiers were being transformed. By the end of the speech they were no longer just a wild crowd but a detachment of Red Army fighters who were prepared to go off to the front and continue the fighting.

This is by no means a case of literary exaggeration. As I was traveling in the Soviet Union many years ago I happened to meet an older man in a hotel where I was staying. In his youth he had served in the Red Army, and he also told of how Trotsky had arrived at the front where he was stationed.

For the rest of my life I will always remember this old man's words. The old man said that as you listened to Trotsky, whether you wanted to or not, you felt like crying.

There are many types of orators and public speakers. Some of them, particularly in revolutionary times, are able to set an audience on fire, although there is not necessarily a lot of content to their speeches.

There was, for instance, the Bolshevik Kirov who, as you probably know, was murdered on Stalin's orders in 1934. An old Bolshevik once told me that when he was young, in the 1920s, he worked on the staff of the Leningrad *Pravda* and often had to edit Kirov's speeches.

He related how when Kirov spoke at the factories he simply overwhelmed his audience. But when it came time to prepare the speech for publication it was like squeezing *tvorog*, a type of Russian cottage cheese ? the more you squeezed it, the more there was nothing left but water.

He pointed out that by contrast when you examined Trotsky's speeches ? and he gave hundreds of speeches before many different audiences ? you always came upon surprising turns of phrase, new ideas and unexpected thoughts.

Trotsky was a thinker who addressed many different areas of human knowledge. His collected works, when they are finally gathered, will have at least 100 or 150 volumes.

In them, we come across writings from virtually every field of social science, from political science to economics, literature, literary criticism, philosophy and ethics.

He devoted articles to many of the latest achievements in science ? everything from Einstein's theory of relativity to the teachings of Sigmund Freud. The breadth of his interests shocked his contemporaries.

In 1923 the newspaper *Pravda* published a letter from a group of young communists. They said: "Comrade Trotsky, we have read many of your articles in many different newspapers addressing a wide range of themes."

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), was the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, socialist opponent of Joseph Stalin, founder of the Fourth International, and strategist of world socialist revolution.

They said they were very surprised, given the enormous responsibility that Trotsky bore and the practical work that he carried out, that he found time to read books devoted to so many areas of human knowledge, and then write substantial articles in these fields.

They asked him if this was a peculiarity of his personality or whether any average person could hope to achieve such results. Trotsky replied that in any field the most difficult period was that of the initial accumulation of material.

He said that even in his youth, when he spent a lot of time in prison and there was virtually nothing to do but to read and write, he always felt that he did not have enough time to read.

But, Trotsky said, as one began to accumulate knowledge in one area it became easier to research in other areas. One could pass from one field to another because the methods of investigation and research were similar in each field. As one went from one field to another one felt that it was almost a matter of leisure or relaxation.

In many of his important works, Trotsky uncovered the tremendous human potential that lies within all mankind and every individual.

In his famous book, *Literature and Revolution*, one of the last chapters is devoted to a description of what might be called communist ideals. Trotsky describes how under socialism and with the transition to communism, more and more victories will be won over nature, and man will begin to transform himself in this process.

This chapter ends in a somewhat unexpected way. He states that after several generations of life under communism, the average human type could hope to rise to the level of Aristotle, Goethe, or Marx.

Of course, to anyone raised on anti-communist ideas or anybody subjected to the notions contained in the mass media today, such ideas would seem utopian.

The advocates of the restoration of capitalism in our own country, Russia, have revealed an entirely different perspective, and they have been quite open about it in the recent years in the press.

We could reduce their perspective to the following: that with the restoration of capitalism, every average human being might be able to rise to the level of an average petty shop keeper.

These are two fundamentally opposed perspectives which now arise before human society.

Trotsky occupies a very special place among the many important thinkers of the twentieth century. He lived for 16 years after Lenin. This was a very dramatic period of human history. Certain knots formed which have not been able to be unravelled to this very day.

Trotsky was able to generalise the major problems which arose during that period to make prognoses which have largely been confirmed by history. He also asked questions and gave answers to problems, many of which remain to this very day.

The last 12 years of his life, Trotsky spent in exile, driven out of the Soviet Union.

He was driven from country to country. He often lived in isolation. He was torn away not only from his homeland but from his many co-thinkers.

He had very meagre material resources at his disposal. Despite these

very difficult conditions, he was able to attract tens of thousands of supporters. He was able to found the Fourth International which continues to this day, with thousands of supporters throughout the world.

Trotsky's fate after his death is no less complicated than that during his lifetime. In the many articles written about Trotsky and Trotskyism in the Soviet Union, you will not find one honest citation. You will not find one honest interpretation of his ideas.

A similar situation can be observed in the West in the field of Sovietology. It seems there is no limit to the inventions used to try to discredit Trotsky.

Not only Western historians, but also such epigones as General Volkogonov, who occupied a very high position in the Soviet bureaucracy and has recently published books about Trotsky, shamelessly use the most outlandish sources in outlining their version of Trotsky's life.

This huge collection of lies and falsifications shows not the strength, but the weakness, of those who continue to try to discredit Trotsky as if he were standing before us alive today.

In order to undermine Trotsky and his influence, not only in the Soviet Union, but in the communist movement as a whole, it was necessary to unleash the Great Terror of 1937 in which hundreds of thousands of leading Bolsheviks, Marxists and intellectuals were destroyed. Perhaps two million people passed through Stalin's camps.

We could say that due to Trotsky's assassination and the destruction of thousands of Soviet communists during the Great Terror and thousands of communists who had fled to the Soviet Union from abroad, mankind as a whole stands one head shorter.

The great French revolutionary Victor Serge wrote a novel called *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, in which, in one episode, he describes the results of the Great Terror.

One person was participating in the fighting in Spain in the 1930s when he found out about the events taking place in the Soviet Union ? how the Great Terror had been unleashed and how thousands of communists were being killed. He said the following to his comrade, "Could you imagine that there were alive in the world today perhaps ten people who correctly understood Einstein's theory of relativity? Imagine, if those people were suddenly exterminated, how far back mankind as a whole would be pushed."

Similarly, by destroying thousands of people who understood how to free mankind from inequality and oppression, Stalin was throwing mankind back many decades.

Even after Trotsky had been murdered and the Great Terror had been carried out, the Stalinist dictatorship feared Trotsky and his supporters. In the Soviet Union and other so-called socialist countries even a neutral, let alone a positive reference to Trotsky, or any other leading member of the Bolshevik party who fell victim to the Great Terror, was completely forbidden. A taboo was placed upon it.

In any Soviet encyclopedia, right through to the end of the 1980s, you could find articles about Hitler, Mussolini and other reactionary figures, but not one serious article about Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev or other leading Bolsheviks.

The only serious biographical article about Trotsky was in Lenin's *Collected Works*. This was supposed to be a solid, academic edition, so the editors could not possibly avoid Lenin's many references to Trotsky.

But here, although it was supposed to be an objective and scientific, scholarly edition, the description of Trotsky begins with the following words: "Trotsky, the most perfidious and odious enemy of Leninism."

With that as a background it is easy to understand that although Marxism officially occupied a high position in Soviet society, in actual fact, it was in the worst possible state.

Whereas Marx, Lenin or Trotsky clearly understood that theory had to guide strategy and strategy had to guide tactics, the Stalinists in control in the Soviet Union turned everything upside down.

They always subordinated political strategy to the everyday zig-zags of political tactics. And theory as a whole was always subordinated to their political strategy.

If you take the whole generation which rose and remained in power after the Great Purges, after 1937, when it came to Marxism, they were completely indifferent.

It was taught in such a way in the universities and the schools that students could not help but be repulsed by Marxism as a whole.

And what resulted was an enormous political vacuum in the country.

This vacuum began to be filled by works that are called *Samizdat*. These were works published illegally or semi-legally in the Soviet Union. People would type them up by hand and distribute them in one way or the other.

Or the vacuum was filled by works of the so-called *Tamizdat* ? works that were sent abroad where they were published and then circulated there and sometimes brought back into the Soviet Union.

In this semi-legal milieu, two basic tendencies began to form among intellectuals.

One was the bourgeois liberal tendency which regarded the very high point of human progress to be in the advanced capitalist countries.

The second tendency was the nationalist-chauvinist tendency which looked back fondly upon the old Tsarist days of Russia and saw the October Revolution as an interruption of the normal development which otherwise would have continued, allowing Russia to flourish as a nationalist power.

These two tendencies both erupted during the period of perestroika and occupied the pages of all the mass media. Of course it must be noted that under glasnost and perestroika it became possible for the first time in 60 years to publish some of Trotsky's works. Some of his books were published with a press run of a hundred thousand copies. This sounds like a lot in the West but for the former Soviet Union that was a very average to poor press run.

These thousands of copies of books by Trotsky were overwhelmed by the wave of anti-communist literature published in the millions and tens of millions in the books, journals and newspapers of the former Soviet Union.

These two main tendencies came to the forefront of the literature and social life in Russia. One of the tendencies turned into a tendency calling themselves democrats, the other tendency call themselves patriots, great-power advocates, and nationalists.

Both these tendencies reject out of hand the October Revolution and Bolshevism. However they draw different conclusions from their views.

The democrats say that Stalinism is the logical and inevitable product of Marxism and the October Revolution, of Leninism. The continuation of the October Revolution therefore leads to such horrific and terrible events as unfolded in the Soviet Union.

The other tendency, the chauvinists, also claim that Stalinism is the continuation of Lenin's thoughts. But they see Stalin's merit in that he led "socialism" to such great victories.

If you look at today's party which calls itself communist, the party headed by Zukanov, you can identify two major themes in its program. One is that within the Bolshevik party, two parties always fought against each other.

In one of those two parties, Zukanov and his supporters name a lot of people who were not really political activists but who have remained popular and deeply respected to this day in Russia. They include Marshall Zhukov, the military leader, Korolyov, the inventor and scientist, Kurchatov, the atomic scientist, and Stakhanov, the worker.

The second tendency which they identify contains people of the most varied political views. The second party is the party of Trotsky, Vlasov, the general who betrayed and went over to Hitler during World War II, Beria, Gorbachev and Yeltsin. They unite all these people together in order to blacken the name of Trotsky.

The second thesis put forward by the Communist Party today is that within the ranks of the Bolshevik party there were always those who looked upon Russia as booty or plunder which could be had for themselves.

As one observes the election campaign taking place today in Russia one is reminded of the Biblical saying of the blind leading the blind. This applies to all the candidates.

We can also recall the words of Marx that ignorance is a demonic force and it can lead to many great tragedies.

After 60 years of being either completely ignored or attacked, the name of Trotsky is once again emerging in the former socialist countries.

The ideals of Trotsky are key to the rebirth, the resurrection of Marxist views, of the Bolshevik world outlook.

So a very interesting picture emerges. For the anti-communist, Trotsky is a person who belongs well in the past. He is a representative of a type of utopian consciousness, and of course he suffered defeat in his struggle against Stalin.

Why is it that year after year dozens, if not hundreds, of articles continue to be written and that in many countries people consider themselves supporters of Trotsky's ideas?

Many people say that the collapse of the regime both in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe means the death of communism.

In reality, what died was not communism but ruling elites and regimes which had nothing in common with Marxism. The fundamental ideas of Marxism, the ideals of social justice, social equality and internationalism cannot die internationally as long as there exists a division between those who are privileged and those who have nothing.

There are people living in very wealthy countries--perhaps a fifth of the world's population. There are of course many very poverty-stricken countries. The majority of the world's population lives in those countries. In many of these countries, and I believe Russia is a primary example, we have not relative, but an absolute immiseration of the population.

In Russia we have access to archives and new documents which shed a new light on the history of the past years. We have much new information about the activity of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, and we can see that throughout the 1930s the Opposition grew in strength and had much greater influence than we knew earlier. There is considerable and growing interest directed towards the history of our country after the October Revolution.

An indication of that interest is indicated here in Australia, thousands of kilometres away from Russia. Hundreds of people have gathered both in Melbourne and Sydney to discuss the ideas of Trotsky.



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