

# New German edition of Leon Trotsky's Problems of Everyday Life

Wolfgang Zimmermann  
18 July 2001

*The following is the forward to a new German edition of Leon Trotsky's Problems of Everyday Life, just published by Arbeiterpresse Verlag, the publishing house of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany.*

This volume contains some of the most important articles and speeches by Leon Trotsky regarding questions of everyday life, culture and education. The writings, collected in the first section under the title *Problems of Everyday Life*, were published in 1923 in the Soviet Union in the daily newspaper *Pravda* and also as a book. The great interest this topic encountered in the Soviet Union is measured by the fact that a second edition had to be published the same year and a third edition was printed in 1925.

These articles were later published together with other speeches and texts by Trotsky on questions of culture in 1927 in volume 21 of a series entitled *The Culture of the Transitional Period*. Some of these additional articles are included in the second part of the present volume.

It was originally planned to publish Trotsky's writings in 23 volumes, however only 12 were finally printed. They were removed from libraries throughout the Soviet Union in 1927 following Trotsky's expulsion from the Communist Party by the Stalin faction.

The present book concludes with the well-known essay by Trotsky entitled "Their Morals and Ours", from 1938, in which he argues against those who, under the banner of morals, equate the October Revolution with Stalinism and liken the attitudes of Trotsky and Lenin to the crimes of the Soviet bureaucracy. After the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, this approach of ascribing the origins of Stalinism to the 1917 Russian Revolution and the policy of the Bolsheviks formed part of the standard repertoire of all those who declared socialism to be dead.

In his recently published book, German author Gerd Koenen, a former Maoist turned anticommunist, goes even further. For him, the "totalitarian character ... of the Bolsheviks' seizure of power" is expressed in "the oppressive practices of everyday life ... the creation of a new man".[1] According to Koenen, a tradition of German "cultural pessimism" and the Nietzschean conception of the "superman" flowed in large part into Bolshevism. He names Maxim Gorki and Anatoly Lunacharsky as the central figures in this so-called "Nietzschean Marxism".

Koenen thereby avails himself of one of the favourite tricks of right-wing demagogues: he writes about the Marxist movement while simply ignoring its evolution, internal contradictions and struggles, seizing upon a peripheral issue and declaring it to be the essential one. The fact is that individual expressions of sympathy within the Marxist movement for Nietzsche's ideas encountered fierce opposition. Lunacharsky's and Gorki's enthusiasm for Nietzsche was not only an exception, it was also merely an episode in their own biographies. Prominent Marxists such as Franz Mehring, Lenin and Trotsky went to great lengths in their critical arguments against Nietzsche. Their conception of the "creation of a new man"—to use Koenen's terminology—was the diametric opposite of Nietzsche's conception of the "superman".

A similarly irreconcilable contradiction exists between the Stalinist view of the "transformation of man", as propagated in the 1930s in all Soviet newspapers, and that of the Bolsheviks, in particular the efforts advanced by Trotsky to lift the cultural level of the masses and overcome the cultural backwardness bequeathed by tsarism. The victory of the Stalinist bureaucracy over the Left Opposition led by Trotsky marked the end of these efforts and a return of the cultural barbarism bequeathed by tsarism—the resurrection of the "ominous figure of the master with his big club". The book presented here is therefore an important document of the fight of the Marxist opposition against Stalinism.

Very early in his writings, Trotsky, who had joined the revolutionary movement in 1897, again and again dealt with the transformation of the human personality and its relationship to society. In his 1906 book *Results and Prospects*, he answered the "socialist ideologues" who understood "preparing the proletariat for socialism in the sense of its being morally regenerated". Trotsky wrote that according to this view, "The proletariat, and even 'humanity' in general, must first of all cast out its old egotistical nature.... As we are as yet far from such a state of affairs, and 'human nature' changes very slowly, socialism is put off for several centuries." [2]

Trotsky explained that socialist psychology should not be confused with the conscious striving for socialism. "The joint struggle against exploitation engenders splendid shoots of idealism, comradely solidarity and self-sacrifice, but at the same time the individual struggle for existence, the ever-yawning abyss of poverty, the differentiation in the ranks of the workers themselves, the pressure of the ignorant masses from below, and the corrupting influence of the bourgeois parties do not permit these splendid shoots to develop fully. For all that, in spite of his remaining philistinely egoistic ... the average worker knows from experience that his simplest requirements and natural desires can be satisfied only on the ruins of the capitalist system." [3]

Trotsky's conclusion was that the task did not consist in developing a socialist psychology as a prerequisite for socialism—a hopeless utopia—but in creating socialist conditions of life as a prerequisite for a socialist psychology.

At the same time, in *Results and Prospects* Trotsky indicated the prerequisites for the creation of such socialist conditions of life. Proceeding on the basis of a detailed investigation of the social and political conditions in Russia and the lessons of the European revolutions of 1789, 1848 and 1905, he came to the conclusion that in Russia the functions of the bourgeois revolution, such as the dissolution of the aristocracy and the liberation of the peasantry, could only be carried out under the leadership of the working class.

"The fundamental and most stable feature of Russian history is the slow tempo of her development, with the economic backwardness, primitiveness of social forms and low level of culture resulting from it." [4] This backwardness did not mean, however, that Russia could simply follow the development of the more advanced capitalist countries. It had to telescope certain stages and realise a combined development.

Thus, the backward countryside petrified at the level of the seventeenth century was confronted with the most modern industry in the cities, which had not developed historically as in the West into hubs of craft industry and trade, but rather as centres for administration and the military, virtually devoid of culture. The Russian cities were largely controlled by foreign capital, accounting for the anti-revolutionary character of the Russian bourgeoisie, which was strongly linked to the big landowners and the aristocracy. Thus the tasks of the bourgeois revolution fell to the working class.

However, the working class could not remain at the level of resolving the democratic tasks. It had to take up socialist measures and the revolution had to become a “permanent revolution”. Trotsky wrote: “In a country where the proletariat has power in its hands as the result of the democratic revolution, the subsequent fate of the dictatorship and socialism depends in the last analysis not only and not so much on the national productive forces, as on the development of the international socialist revolution.”[5]

This was Trotsky’s perspective—which formed the basis for the triumph of the October Revolution in 1917.

The seizure of power by the proletariat did not overcome at one blow Russia’s economic backwardness and lack of culture, however. The Bolsheviks were conscious of this problem and looked for the support of the proletariat of Western Europe. They placed the emphasis of their work on the construction of the Communist International, in order to create optimum conditions for the extension of the revolution into the advanced capitalist countries. The defeat of the German revolution in 1918-19 by the Social Democratic government under Ebert and Noske, and the failure of the European revolution, dealt heavy blows to the Bolsheviks and strengthened the imperialist armies of intervention then invading the Soviet Union, which in turn fuelled the civil war, which lasted until 1921.

The Bolsheviks had to undertake measures to preserve Soviet power until the European working class succeeded in conquering power and came to their assistance. In the field of economics, the NEP (New Economic Policy) introduced a partial return to market methods, in order to set in motion the economy which had been devastated by the war. While the economy recovered rapidly, the NEP also strengthened conservative bourgeois and petty-bourgeois layers and the emerging bureaucracy. The control of the administration by the masses—their eligibility for office and their ability to remove officials—envisaged in the Bolsheviks’ party programme made necessary an offensive in the areas of education and culture.

Trotsky’s writings on everyday life were published in this transitional period, as was his book *Literature and Revolution*. Trotsky has often been accused of having retreated from the central political issues, when, in this threatening situation where the bureaucratic tendencies in the Soviet Union were growing stronger, he dedicated himself to questions of culture and art. But these critics overlook the fact that in the period of the isolation of the Soviet state, following the defeats of the international working class, together with the development of production the revolutionary regime faces the considerable task of raising the low cultural level of the broad working class masses. Trotsky constantly stressed the significance of the education of young people, in order to create a counterweight to the apparatus: “The initial socialist accumulation will leave many welts on the backs of the working class and its youth. For this reason, the education of the youth, the education of its most conscious elements, is a question of life and death for us.”[6]

Trotsky argued against those who believed that the matter could be dealt with from above by issuing orders and party congress resolutions. He pointed out that there had been no shortage of resolutions. Trotsky saw the main problem in the masses’ general passivity, carelessness and lack of culture. Using the example of badly produced newspapers and books, he warned that this should “be made the object of consideration, criticism

and consultation of broad circles”. He wrote: “People cannot be made to move into new habits of life—they must grow into them gradually, as they grew into their old ways of living. Or they must deliberately and consciously create a new life—as they will do in the future.”[7]

The present volume is a result of discussions inside the party about how the masses’ backwardness and lack of culture bequeathed by the old tsarist regime could be overcome. The headlines of the individual articles, which first appeared in *Pravda* in 1923, speak for themselves: “The Newspaper and its Readers”, “Vodka, the Church and the Cinema”, “From the Old Family to the New” and “The Struggle for Cultured Speech”.

These articles evince an unshakeable conviction that it is possible to liberate the masses from their earlier passivity by means of education and by providing cultural opportunities such as cinema, local libraries, etc. The improvement of human society appears here not as an unattainable utopia, referred to in the occasional Sunday speech, but as a practical task of enlightenment and cultural endeavour. Trotsky gave his full attention to the most oppressed layers in society: He wrote, for example, “It is quite true that there are no limits to masculine egotism in ordinary life. In order to change the conditions of life we must learn to see them through the eyes of women.”[8]

Trotsky’s view of the “new man” is, as every article in the present volume shows, redolent with the progressive ideas of the Enlightenment. Just one decade later the policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy represented the opposite. The bureaucracy began to raise its head when, in the autumn of 1923, the German Communist Party, under the influence of Stalin and Zinoviev, missed the revolutionary opportunities of the “German October”. The state and party bureaucracy was encouraged by the mood of weariness and disappointment that spread among the masses. The defeats of the international working class nourished the bureaucracy.

Under conditions of isolation, the Soviet Union’s economic backwardness led to the development of a “gendarme”, as Trotsky characterised the bureaucracy, whose task consisted in preserving social inequality: “If the state does not die away, but grows more and more despotic, if the plenipotentiaries of the working class become bureaucratized, and the bureaucracy rises above the new society, this is not for some secondary reasons like the psychological relics of the past, etc., but is a result of the iron necessity to give birth to and support a privileged minority so long as it is impossible to guarantee genuine equality.”[9]

In 1923, i.e., the year when *Problems of Everyday Life* appeared, Trotsky began the fight against the bureaucracy with a series of articles under the title *The New Course*. That was the prelude for the formation of the Left Opposition. In the end, the ruling bureaucracy could only consolidate its power by destroying all opposition forces and the generation of old Bolsheviks in the 1930s.

The Stalinist campaign of “transforming man”, which provided the accompaniment for the Great Terror, was, as Trotsky explained, not a socialist policy: “The Russian people never knew in the past either a great religious reformation like the Germans, or a great bourgeois revolution like the French. Out of these two furnaces, if we leave aside the reformation-revolution of the British Islanders in the seventeenth century, came bourgeois individuality, a very important step in the development of human personality in general. The Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 necessarily meant the first awakening of individuality in the masses, its crystallisation out of the primitive medium. That is to say, they fulfilled, in abridged form and accelerated tempo, the educational work of the bourgeois reformations and revolutions of the West. Long before this work was finished, however, even in the rough, the Russian Revolution, which had broken out in the twilight of capitalism, was compelled by the course of the class struggle to leap over to the road of socialism. The contradictions in the sphere of Soviet culture only reflect and refract the

economic and social contradictions which grew out of this leap. The awakening of personality under these circumstances necessarily assumes a more or less petty-bourgeois character, not only in economics, but also in family life and lyric poetry. The bureaucracy itself has become the carrier of the most extreme, and sometimes unbridled, bourgeois individualism. Permitting and encouraging the development of economic individualism (piecework, private land allotments, premiums, decorations), it at the same time ruthlessly suppresses the progressive side of individualism in the realm of spiritual culture (critical views, the development of one's own opinion, the cultivation of personal dignity)."[10]

In contrast to the Soviet reality, Trotsky wrote, "Socialism, if it is worthy of the name, means human relations without greed, friendship without envy and intrigue, love without base calculation." [11] However, in the Soviet Union of the 1930s abortion was again banned, women engaged in prostitution once more, children lived on the city streets and the death penalty was reintroduced, even for children of twelve years of age. In the spheres of culture, youth and the family the reactionary, i.e., retrogressive, character of Stalinism became particularly clear. The "old" type of man had triumphed.

By equating this Stalinist policy with that of Lenin and Trotsky, Koenen only makes clear that he rejects a perspective based on the liberty and equality of the mass of the population. For Trotsky, the creation of a "new man" never meant the creation of a "superman" directed against society.

As he argued in *Literature and Revolution*: "More correctly, the shell in which the cultural construction and self-education of Communist man will be enclosed, will develop all the vital elements of contemporary art to the highest point. Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonised, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx." [12]

Today, in a time when philosophical theories abound which deny the possibility of gaining objective knowledge about the world and political theories accumulate which reject the possibility of changing society, Trotsky's writings offer an abundance of arguments in favour of a socialist transformation of the relations between human beings. Anybody who seeks an alternative to the cycle of oppression and war will find the most contemporary responses to current problems in Trotsky's works.

#### Notes

1. Gerd Koenen, *Utopie der Säuberung (The Utopia of the Purges)*, Berlin, 1998, p. 127
2. Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, New Park Publications, London, 1982, p. 229
3. Ibid., p. 230
4. Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Pluto Press, London, 1997, p. 25
5. Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, New Park Publications, London, 1982, p. 155
6. Leon Trotsky, "The Situation of the Republic and the Tasks of Working Class Youth", in *Problems of Everyday Life* (translated from the German)
7. Leon Trotsky, "Against Bureaucracy, Progressive and Unprogressive", in *Problems of Everyday Life*, Monad Press, New York, 1979, p. 63
8. Leon Trotsky, *ibid.* p. 65
9. Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Labor Publications, Detroit, 1991, p. 47
10. Leon Trotsky, *ibid.* p. 149
11. Leon Trotsky, *ibid.* p. 132
12. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, RedWords, London, 1991, p. 284

Trotsky's writings are available in English from Mehring Books:

<http://www.wsws.org/cgi-bin/store/commerce.cgi>



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**