

Letters to Trotsky: A remarkable play at Bielefeld's Theaterlabor in Germany

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On March 14, a remarkable play premiered at the Theaterlabor in Bielefeld, Germany, *Letters to Trotsky* (*Briefe an Trotzki*). The production presents the audience with an impressive dramatic collage, based on letters discovered in Soviet military archives by historian Gleb Albert and addressed to Leon Trotsky, the founder and commander of the Red Army. A succession of scenes and riveting performances succeed in recreating the atmosphere prevailing in the young Soviet Union in the years after the end of the Civil War.

This climate arose out of the great hopes that had inspired the Revolution, but it was also a product of the terrible distress suffered by so many Russians during World War I and the Civil War, and the inherited backwardness and poverty of the country. These difficulties, exacerbated by the isolation of the young workers' state, had the effect of strengthening bureaucratic tendencies that were beginning to develop like a cancer in the state and the party. The mortally ill Lenin, who had recognised the danger, was no longer in a position to prevent this development.

The play fills the stage with people who sought Trotsky's attention through their personal letters. They turned for help to Trotsky, the most popular leader of the Revolution next to Lenin and their greatest hope for a better future. However, it is above all through the figure of Trotsky's young secretary, Mikhail Glasman, that the production evokes the hardships and threats faced by the first workers' state, especially after the failure of the revolution in Germany in 1923.

Albert researched the Red Army military archives for material about internationalism in the early Soviet Union from 1921 to 1927. Searching through the military correspondence of the time, he discovered these letters—probably a small fraction of those that actually came into Trotsky's hands.

Albert writes in the production's accompanying program booklet: "Trotsky's incoming mail was an arena for contending fan and hate letters, petitions from old revolutionaries and poor farmers, requests from autograph hunters, advertising postcards, appeals for clemency, invitations, library reminders and chain letters. Totalling several thousand, the letters are addressed to Leon Trotsky, organiser of the October Revolution and builder of the Red Army. Many letter writers believed Trotsky represented their only chance of escaping what often seemed a hopeless situation."

These letters were not relevant to Albert's research, but he was so impressed by them that he showed them to director Yuri Birte

Anderson, who immediately considered using the material in her theatrical work. She explained in an interview: "The letters are from the early 1920s. They reveal the post-revolutionary process and what emerged from the idea of the Revolution—from the preconceptions, dreams, hopes, demands and sometimes the desires people attached to it. The question: After the Revolution, what now? What have I fought for? Can I fulfill my aims?"

Anderson points out that the Revolution did not take place so long ago; her grandfather had witnessed it. "The aftermath of the October Revolution affected the whole of the twentieth century, and no form of left-wing politics can avoid having to deal with the experiences of that time in some way or other. The question remains whether one can change things through one's actions ... or whether one is crushed by the very notion, or even illusion, of believing in someone or something".

The letters used in the play come from a transitional period. Trotsky is still viewed by the letter writers as a powerful figure of the Revolution, although a fierce campaign against him has already been launched in the Central Committee. Only a few years later, in 1927, Trotsky would be exiled and the Stalinist bureaucracy would make great efforts to falsify documents and delete his image from photographs. It would persecute Trotsky and his followers in many countries, until he was finally murdered by one of Stalin's agents in 1940.

Symptomatic of the situation and mood in 1923 is letter from a Red Army soldier, Nadia Bogomolova, wonderfully played by Alina Tinnefeld:

"Comrade Trotsky,

"I am writing to you as a human being in the truest and noblest sense of the words. I have served in your Red Army for three years. For three years I have been teaching Red Army soldiers that there is no 'turning back', that there must be no retreat for a soldier at a time when truth can either die or triumph, that hard-won rights are not to be surrendered, even at the cost of one's own life.

"By teaching others, I was able to steel my own proud will. Your Red Army has taught me to stay strong until the end. But here in the streets of Moscow, I fear for my senses. I carry my ideals about like a banner in front of me and am going to die for them. Only you can save me. Allow me to see you and hear my story. I implore you, for my strength is running out.

"A woman in the Red Army, from [Semyon] Budyonny's army"

The play begins with the projection of some sequences from the

film *Tsar to Lenin* that orient the audience to the situation and problems in the Soviet republic following the Civil War.

Some of the requests in the letters seem absurd in view of the crucial, world-historical situation unfolding in the early 1920s. For example, a representative of a research laboratory in New York asks for a sample of Trotsky's hair.

Viennese anthropologist Professor Friedrich S. Krauss (Thomas Behrend), reminds Trotsky of their chess games at the Café Central. He wants to complete his book, which contains portraits of women from around the world, with pictures of the most beautiful Soviet citizens. He requests "the loan of 100-200 pictures of the most beautiful female figures representative of each of the united peoples of the Soviet republics". This appeal is indignantly rejected in the play by Bogomolova, the fiery Red Army officer.

Rosa Spieß, the Trotsky family's landlady from the time of his exile in Vienna and someone to whom he often owed rent, congratulates him on the high office he has attained and asks him to intercede for her nephew who wants to work in the Soviet Union.

Harriet Frances Powell (Agnetha Jaunich), an Australian trade union activist, writes repeatedly to Trotsky. She has been desperately searching for her missing husband. She assumes he is engaged on the "crucial front" in Germany. He is said to be a first-rate engineer. She hopes Trotsky's office can find out exactly where he is.

Willi Sommer, a German sailor interned by the British military together with Trotsky in Amherst, Nova Scotia in 1917, has a family that is struggling to survive due to his imprisonment, unemployment and the rampant inflation. On September 16, 1923, he writes: "I have taken the step of turning to you because I am no longer in contact with anyone who can help me obtain the most elementary things; I only have a cot and a large bed". He includes a picture of himself in uniform as reminder.

The forester, Aleksandra Anufrievna Grishchuk, makes a heart-rending complaint about individuals who had posed as Red Army soldiers and stolen her cow. Accompanying this scene is a black and white film showing the woman with her cow, which she gently strokes and feeds. The cow was her most important possession. Official investigations into this case were apparently launched, according to Albert. However, most of the letters received a covering note from Trotsky's secretary and ended up in the archives.

The scenes involving a certain Shmil Stein (Michael Grunert) are also striking. An old, illiterate man, he asks his neighbour to write a letter to Trotsky for him, because he is alone and penniless. His son was shot, although he was innocent of any offense. The neighbour gives him shoes because the old man intends making the long journey barefoot to deliver the letter to Trotsky personally.

The mostly young ensemble of the Bielefeld Theaterlabor—an independent theatre founded in 1983 and based in the former Dürkopp works—marvelously bring to life the different personalities behind the selected letters.

The set for *Letters to Trotsky* consists of raised platforms of different heights on both sides of the proscenium. These are fenced off from centre stage by irregularly positioned wooden palings

seemly made from young birch trees. This gives the impression of a grid or cage, and conveys the atmosphere of confinement in which the poor and sometimes desperate petitioners are trapped. The suitcases they carry across stage simultaneously symbolise the new start and hopefulness of the situation, but also the uprooting created by of the Civil War and the protagonists' travels across the vast land to serve the Revolution and achieve their rights.

In stark contrast, the desk belonging to Glasman (Luke Pergande) is placed in the centre of the mostly empty stage in the other scenes. It is not known whether Glasman was the official who received these letters, but this is not so relevant. By making him the play's central figure, the production succeeds in combining the various scenes into a single story, as well as creating the climate of isolation in which both he and Trotsky are operating.

It is historically true that Glasman, a young student, was Trotsky's personal secretary and stenographer and worked tirelessly by his side on the famous train during the Civil War, and afterward.

A film of Glasman sorting letters and thinking aloud is projected onto the back wall of the stage, while the actor silently sits at his desk working on the letters. He is increasingly brought to despair over the flood of incoming mail to Trotsky, to whom he often calls out in vain.

Between scenes, Glasman expresses his feelings by improvising on the piano. Toward the end of the play, he writes a letter of resignation to Trotsky. The party had expelled him and banned him from any further political activity. In an account of the time of her family's exile in Alma Ata, quoted by Trotsky in *My Life*, his wife Natalia Sedova writes: "They [the Stalinist faction] had already driven the dear, modest Glasman to suicide in 1924".

Letters to Trotsky ends with projected images of the victims of Stalin's purges, taken from one of David King's books. Their connection with the letters is, of course, quite obvious. However, they might give one the impression that Revolution and Civil War were in vain. Of course, Trotsky himself did not see it this way. He regarded his role in exile—defending Marxism against Stalinism and establishing the Fourth International—as even more significant than his work in previous years. Without his clear analysis of the bureaucratic degeneration of the first workers' state, an understanding of its collapse and the entire history of the twentieth century would not be available to us today.



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