

Tariq Ali's false account of the suicide of Adolf Joffe

Julie Hyland

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On August 21, a comment appeared in the *Guardian* newspaper by Tariq Ali on the suicide of the Russian revolutionary Adolf Abramovich Joffe in 1927.

Joffe is a significant figure—one of the five members of the Military Revolutionary Committee that organised the establishment of Soviet rule in October 1917 and part of the subsequent Soviet delegation to peace negotiations at Brest Litovsk in 1918. Little more than a decade later he was to take his own life, on November 16, 1927.

Ali gives the impression that he decided, out of the blue, to write on a subject he had read about some 40 years before. He refers to a pamphlet he read “over four decades ago” containing Joffe’s suicide letter, which was addressed to “Dear Lev Davidovich [Leon Trotsky].”

In fact, although unacknowledged, the article was timed to coincide with the 73rd anniversary of Trotsky’s assassination by the GPU agent Ramon Mercader. Its purpose was to slander the co-leader of the Russian revolution in a particularly dishonest and cynical manner.

There is not the space here to go into Ali’s long and disreputable career. Suffice it to say that he is a man devoid of any principles, except his own advancement.

For many years, he was the leader of the International Marxist Group, the British section of the Pabloite United Secretariat, whose fundamental opposition to Trotskyism centred on its rejection of the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism and the need for a political revolution in the Soviet Union, instead attributing to the bureaucracy a progressive political potential.

So persistent has been Ali’s infatuation with Stalinism that in 1988 he went so far as to dedicate a book to future-President Boris Yeltsin, who he proclaimed to be leading the political revolution in Russia.

Ali counts on the fact that many people will know nothing of his history. And he can rely on his friends at the *Guardian* and elsewhere to keep them in the dark, while publishing whatever serves his and their ends at any given time.

In this instance, Ali’s false purpose is betrayed by the headline, “A Suicide Note to Trotsky that Displayed Political Passions We Should Not Forget.”

“Men like Adolf Joffe couldn’t remain silent and submit to Stalinist policies and practices—and he criticised Trotsky for doing so,” the strap line states.

The insinuation is that Joffe criticised Trotsky for *Trotsky’s* silence and *Trotsky’s* submission to “Stalinist policies and practices.”

This is an out-and-out lie. Between 1923 and 1927, Trotsky led an extraordinary struggle against the policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy. This struggle is recorded in voluminous documents and many volumes, including such masterpieces as *The New Course*, *Lessons of*

October and *Problems of the Chinese Revolution*, the last volume dealing with the betrayal of the 1927 revolution as a result of Stalin’s policies.

It was this indefatigable and courageous struggle that led to Trotsky’s expulsion, first from the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party in October 1927, and then from the party itself one month later. In January 1928, he was exiled to Alma Ata, Kazakhstan and then banished from the Soviet Union in February 1929—the start of a long period of enforced exile that would culminate in his murder in Mexico on Stalin’s orders.

Not only does this historical record repudiate Ali’s slur that Trotsky acquiesced in the policies of Stalinism, but Joffe made no such criticism and it is not the content of his letter.

An important and moving document, it is no accident that the last statement of Joffe’s life was addressed to Trotsky.

One of Trotsky’s closest friends, he was a signatory to the “Declaration of the 46” to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party dated October 15, 1923—the first document of what became known as the Left Opposition, led by Trotsky, to the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy.

Like all of the leaders of the Left Opposition, Joffe suffered for his stand. By 1927, longstanding illnesses left him wracked with pain and unable to work. As a doctor, he was well aware that there was no chance of recovery, especially under conditions where the Stalin faction callously blocked him from receiving the treatment he so urgently required.

His anguish was compounded by the treatment of Trotsky by the ruling faction.

Just four days after Trotsky’s expulsion from the Communist Party, Joffe took his own life. Deprived of the means of participating in the political struggle against the bureaucracy, his suicide was intended as an act of defiance. It was, as Joffe wrote in his letter, “the protest of a fighter who has been brought to such a state that he can react to so shameful a deed [Trotsky’s expulsion] in no other way.”

It is noticeable that while Ali refers to Joffe’s widow, Maria, and her book *One Long Night*, he does not mention the far more political and no less significant work by Joffe’s daughter, Nadezhda, *Back in Time: My Life, My Fate, My Epoch*. The only memoir written in the post-Stalin Soviet Union by a member of the Left Opposition, Nadezhda Joffe’s book quotes her father’s suicide letter in full and gives a powerful account of the issues involved, dedicating a chapter specifically to Trotsky, whom she greatly admired.

Ali hopes again to rely on people’s lack of historical knowledge to substantially misrepresent the significance and content of Joffe’s letter.

After stressing the “correctness of the path” Trotsky had marked out from 1905 with his elaboration of the theory of Permanent Revolution, Joffe continued in his note, “But you have often forsaken your personal correctness in favour of an agreement or compromise which you valued too highly. This is a mistake.”

Ali quotes this section, but omits with ellipses what follows directly: Joffe’s emphasis that “I repeat, politically you have been right, and now you are more correct than ever before. One day the party will understand this, and history will definitely make the proper assessment.”

The omission is deliberate. Joffe wrote as a dear friend and collaborator. His note was a declaration of political, moral and personal solidarity with Trotsky and recognition of his central role in the October revolution and the struggle against Stalinism.

Ali’s account, however, changes the whole tone of Joffe’s comment and twists it.

He asserts, “Joffe had watched as the opposition negotiated, compromised and accepted the decision of the party, right or wrong. Trotsky had, at that point, not favoured the idea put forward by some of his supporters: a total break with Stalin’s faction and the announcement of a new party.”

This is a fabrication. Joffe did not specify in his note to what his criticism referred, but it was certainly not over the issue of the formation of a new party, with which neither he nor Trotsky agreed in 1927, despite Ali’s insinuation otherwise. The Left Opposition was not prepared to abandon the struggle in the Communist Party and the Communist International—to which tens of millions around the world gave their allegiance—as long as there was any possibility of altering their political course.

Trotsky would not come to that decision until the world-shaking events in Germany in 1933, when Hitler was able to come to power without a shot being fired in opposition. Under conditions where the Communist International rejected any discussion of the disastrous consequences of Stalin’s policies, Trotsky denounced it as dead for the purposes of revolution and issued the call for the formation of a new, Fourth International.

In his own account, Trotsky wrote of the Left Opposition having made “principled concessions” in 1926 to forge, in opposition to Stalin, the Joint (Bolshevik-Leninist) Opposition with a significant faction led by Grigory Zinoviev.

These concessions, “which I considered and still consider impermissible,” were made “against my vote,” Trotsky wrote in *In Defence of Marxism*. That he did not protest openly at the time was a “mistake,” Trotsky continued, but it was one occasioned by circumstances in which “there was generally not much room for open protests—we were working illegally.”

This is a critical point, and one that is a matter of indifference to Ali. Internationally, Stalin’s policies had led to the defeat of the 1923 German revolution, the defeat of the 1926 General Strike in Britain and the crushing of the Chinese Revolution in 1927. These grave setbacks to the world revolution strengthened the conservative Soviet bureaucracy.

As the leader of a tendency working under extremely difficult conditions, not the least of which was intensifying state repression, there were occasions when Trotsky felt compelled to accept certain tactical concessions, including those with which he was in sharp disagreement.

The advisability or otherwise of one or another of these concessions may be the subject of legitimate debate amongst historians. But it is

undeniable that they were motivated by Trotsky’s deep and profound awareness of his responsibility for the future not only of the Communist Party, but of the international socialist workers’ movement, and his hope of being able to continue the critical task of political clarification.

Joffe understood this only too well. As if to underscore the life-and-death character of the struggle in which Trotsky was engaged, Joffe in his letter evoked Lenin and his “unbending and unyielding character” as the example that Trotsky should emulate—all within the context of reaffirming the correctness of Trotsky’s path.

One only has to compare Ali’s treatment of Joffe’s letter to the assessment made by Isaac Deutscher to appreciate the scale of Ali’s distortion.

Deutscher quotes the same part of Joffe’s note in the second part of his trilogy on Trotsky’s life, *The Prophet Unarmed*, but makes an entirely opposing point to Ali.

He writes: “In this, his last word, therefore, he wished that Trotsky should find in himself that ‘unyielding strength’ which would help their common cause to eventual even if delayed triumph.

“The criticism, coming from the depth of a dying friend’s devotion and love could not but move and impress Trotsky: he was to stand almost alone, ‘unbending and unyielding’ for the rest of his life.”

It is in the dishonest presentation of events that a political scoundrel reveals himself.

Why the surreptitious marking of the immense crime of Trotsky’s assassination with a deceitful account of Joffe’s suicide? The reasons were anticipated by Trotsky himself.

In her book, Nadezhda Joffe cites Trotsky’s account of her father’s death. Informed anonymously of his action and the letter addressed to him, Trotsky rushed to Joffe’s home. The letter had disappeared. Only after Trotsky’s protests at its theft had spread throughout Moscow was he finally given a photostatic copy of the original.

Why this was the case “I cannot even attempt to explain,” Trotsky wrote. “Failing to conceal the letter from the whole world, the cynical enemy tried to exploit for its own purposes those very lines not written for the public eye.”

This is a perfect description of Tariq Ali and his motives.



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