Trotsky in New York, 1917: A Radical on the Eve of Revolution, by Kenneth D. Ackerman

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8 October 2016

The newly published book *Trotsky in New York, 1917: A Radical on the Eve of Revolution* has two major characters: "old" New York on the eve of America's entry into World War I, and Leon Trotsky, who spent an extraordinary ten-week period in the city before returning to Russia in the aftermath of the February Revolution. Once in Russia, Trotsky rapidly emerged as the greatest mass leader of the Revolution. Urging and overseeing the unification of his important faction of socialist internationalists (the Mezhrayontsi) with the Bolsheviks, Trotsky co-led with Vladimir Lenin the October 1917 Revolution, which overthrew the bourgeois provisional government and established the first workers' state in history.

Trotsky in New York, 1917 focuses on a remarkable period in the life of one of the most significant political figures in modern history. The reader cannot help but be amazed by the fact that a man who was living in the Bronx and riding the New York subways between January and March of 1917 would, before the end of the year, lead millions of workers in the greatest revolution in world history.

Kenneth D. Ackerman is a Washington attorney who has written a number of biographies. His previous subjects have included "Boss" Tweed, the colourful nineteenth-century New York Democratic Party politician and ruthless dictator of Tammany Hall; James Garfield, the twentieth president of the United States, who was felled by an assassin in 1881; and J. Edgar Hoover, the vicious anti-communist head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

It might seem odd that the same author could write about Tweed and Trotsky, and this reviewer opened Ackerman's latest work with a certain degree of trepidation. But his lively book is a pleasant surprise.

Trotsky in New York, 1917 is a work of popular history. It does not provide an in-depth examination of Trotsky's conceptions or the political conflicts that split the Second International following the outbreak of World War I. But popular history is a genre that Ackerman knows well, and he is a gifted storyteller. He has unearthed a wealth of previously little known material and produced from it a book that is appealing and thought-provoking.

Moreover, Ackerman's portrayal of Trotsky is unaffected by the dishonesty, resentment and hostility typical of most academic biographers of the great revolutionary. After the works of Professors Thatcher, Swain and Service, it is refreshing to read an account of Trotsky's life that is not composed primarily of malicious falsifications.

Ackerman himself does not entirely avoid outbursts of middle-class moralising about Trotsky's disrespect for bourgeois society and capitalist governments. But, in the main, he keeps these sentiments under wraps. While Ackerman is not a supporter of Trotsky's politics, he unquestionably has deep respect for his political genius and personal integrity.

Trotsky in New York, 1917 has particular relevance at a time when both America and the world face the danger, once again, of world war, and when the centenary of the Russian Revolution next year will recall the pivotal role that historic event played in ending World War I.

In this context, the author provides fresh and valuable insights into the extraordinary role that Trotsky played in New York in the first months of 1917. Unhindered by the fact that he spoke little English, he waged a political struggle for Marxist principles that had a lasting impact on the future of the socialist movement in the US and internationally, and on the political development of the American working class.

In his autobiography, *My Life*, Trotsky wrote just ten brief pages on his time in New York, including the following passage:

> "Of the legends that have sprung up about me, the greater number have to do with my life in New York… In New York, where I stayed for two months, the newspapers had me engaged in any number of occupations, each more fantastic than the one before. If all the adventures that the newspapers ascribed to me were banded together in a book, they would make a far more entertaining biography than the one I am writing here.
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> "But I must disappoint my American readers. My only profession in New York was that of a revolutionary socialist. This was before the war for 'liberty' and 'democracy,' and in those days mine was a profession no more reprehensible than that of a bootlegger. I wrote articles, edited a newspaper, and addressed labour meetings. I was up to my neck in work, and consequently I did not feel at all like a stranger."

Thanks to Ackerman's account of Trotsky's activities in the city, we now know that this was a significant understatement of his role.

Trotsky arrived in the US in January 1917 as a political exile, recently deported from France and Spain due to his anti-war writings and activities. Not long before, he had passed through the bitter experience of the Great Betrayal carried out by the European Social Democracy on August 4, 1914, when the German Social Democratic Party and virtually every other section of the Second International lined up behind their own ruling class to support the war.

By the time he docked in Manhattan, on January 14, Trotsky was already well known in New York socialist circles as the charismatic and popular leader of the 1905 Russian Revolution and an intransigent opponent of imperialist war. A large crowd, consisting mainly of exiled Russian revolutionaries, along with Jewish, Russian, German and Polish émigrés, was there to greet him. His arrival was covered in all the main English, Russian, Yiddish and German-language newspapers.

Ackerman conveys to his readers the ambience of the city in which Trotsky had arrived.

"New York at that moment lived like no other place on earth," he writes, evoking the city's ebullient personality, marked by the emergence of Broadway musicals, vaudeville and jazz, its unique sky line of

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impossibly tall buildings, and its "dense, bulging neighbourhoods that smelled and sounded like foreign countries, where these too each had its own music." In stark contrast were "Europe's great cities, Paris, London and Vienna, all turned dark, increasingly populated by widows, gripped with hunger, or ruled by military edict," as the First World War entered its third catastrophic year.

Trotsky's central preoccupation was the attitude of the socialist movement to the war and America's entry into it. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson won the US presidential election on the basis of the slogan "He kept us out of the war!" That was a fraud. America had been heavily involved from the outset, turning countless young lives into dollars through weapons and other lucrative supplies contracts. The issue was: would Wilson take the country directly into the war to ensure those interests? And if so, how would the socialist movement respond?

Trotsky immersed himself in the struggle against the war. He and his wife Natalya renewed their political relations and friendships with several exiled Russian revolutionists, including Nicolai Bukharin, already a well-known Bolshevik and close associate of Lenin. Bukharin insisted that the couple visit the New York Public Library on their first evening in the city.

From then on, Trotsky was often there, making a thorough study of the economic history of the United States. Referring to this in *My Life*, he wrote, "The figures showing the growth of American exports during the war astounded me; they were, in fact, a complete revelation. And it was those same figures that not only predetermined America's intervention in the war, but the decisive part that the United States would play in the world after the war as well."

Trotsky and Bukharin became co-workers in the editorial office of the daily *Novy Mir* (New World). The Russian-language revolutionary internationalist newspaper was "arguably the most impactful Russian journal in the Western Hemisphere, easily overshadowing the city's three larger-circulation Russian dailies." Lenin regularly read it.

In columns and articles in *Novy Mir*, and in his many contributions and interviews with German, English and Yiddish-language newspapers, Trotsky publicly insisted on the imperialist nature of the war and his opposition to all of its combatants. In his first American interview, with the *New York Call* (the English-language organ of the Socialist Party of America) Trotsky accused President Woodrow Wilson of having "no interest in stopping the gravy train of rich wartime weapons contracts."

He compared the president to "a smug, middle-class merchant who exploits the poor on weekdays and then goes to church on Sundays, piously asking absolution for his sins." As for France and Germany, Trotsky insisted they were continuing to fight only because "they fear the day of reckoning" when "they must give an accounting to their subjects for the wastage of human life and money." He predicted that after the war "social unrest will eclipse anything the earth has ever seen."

Trotsky was immediately at odds with the American Socialist Party's conservative, complacent and pacifist leadership, headed by Morris Hillquit, whom Trotsky famously described as "the ideal leader for successful dentists." Hillquit was a wealthy lawyer, preoccupied with bourgeois legality and compromise. He "cared more about winning elections and placating the capitalist press than fighting the class struggle," Ackerman writes.

During Trotsky's second evening in the city, around twenty members and supporters of the Socialist Party's anti-war left-wing met with him to discuss a political strategy to fight Hillquit. They included Bukharin, Alexandra Kollontai, also a Russian revolutionary, Sen Katayama, the 60-year-old founder of Japan's socialist movement, and 25-year-old Louis Fraina, the Italian-American socialist who was to become one of Trotsky's closest comrades in the city. Summarising the outcome of their hours-long discussion, Katayama later wrote, "We intended to organize the Left-Wing under the direction of Comrade Trotzky; and Madam Kolontay, who was going to Europe, was to establish a link between the European and American Left-Wing movements." The participants also decided to establish a new and separate weekly Marxist journal.

On February 3, 1917, within less than three weeks of this meeting, President Wilson broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, approving "war appropriations totalling almost $900 million (about $30 billion today), enough to finance the rapid initial deployment of three million men at the President's command," and unleashing, in tandem with the media, the same kind of patriotic "war fever" that Trotsky had experienced in Europe. Ackerman describes the chauvinist wave that swept over the United States: "German, speaking German, even having a German-sounding name, all became suspect. And being pro-peace began to sound even worse, like cowardice."

Trotsky "became one of New York's leading voices against entering the World War," and addressed "packed crowds at the Brooklyn Lyceum, Manhattan's Beethoven Hall, the Labor Temple near Union Square and similar venues." He also wrote articles and columns that appeared in multiple newspapers.

On February 5, Trotsky had his first encounter with Morris Hillquit. Joining some 4,000 others at a mass anti-war rally in Carnegie Hall, which overflowed onto the streets outside, he heard the Socialist Party leader deliver the main report, centred on the theme, "A Rich Man's War but a Poor Man's Fight."

Trotsky wrote in *Novy Mir* the next day that he was impressed by the fact that the vast majority there "consisted of the revolutionary working class." He also approved the resolution passed by the huge crowd, which condemned the World War and the parasitic role of American capitalists.

He wrote scathingly, however, about Hillquit's co-speakers on the platform, a motley bunch of bourgeois, religious pacifists, suffragettes, union bureaucrats and others, who, Trotsky warned, "when they hear the first shot, will gladly call themselves good patriots and start supporting the governmental machine of mass murders," just as their social patriotic counterparts had done in Europe.

And this, under conditions where scores of militant workers were already being arrested across the US, and striking Brooklyn factory workers were facing Navy militiamen "chas[ing] them away with fixed bayonets." Such repressive measures were aimed at utilising the war emergency, Ackerman writes, to "crack down on labor and the left."

In his *Novy Mir* article, Trotsky insisted that the fight against war meant a struggle against capitalism—an "organised uprising against bourgeois society," not "peace under any circumstances." He concluded that the rally had resolved to fight against capitalist war, and declared, "We will watch that this obligation is fulfilled to the very end—without any weaknesses, compromises and doubts!"

Ackerman cites a memoir of a friend of Hillquit's who "dared to challenge" Trotsky on his hostility to social patriotism. Trotsky apparently replied, "Of all the species of political fauna, none was lower, none more contemptible, none more dangerous than the Socialist who defended his country in time of war."

In late February, amid lurid government claims of 100,000 German spies operating as saboteurs within the country, reports of the "Zimmermann Telegram" appeared in the press. This was an alleged German plot hatched in Berlin to unite with Mexico and reconquer former Mexican territory in the US southwest. Wilson exploited public outrage to build support for entering the war.

When the associate editor of *Forward*, the largest Yiddish-language daily socialist newspaper, with its 200,000 daily readers, responded to the Zimmermann affair by quickly abandoning his anti-war stance and patriotically embracing a US war against Germany, Trotsky, who had written regular columns for the newspaper since his arrival in New York, angrily confronted the newspaper's high-profile editor and, having heard the latter confirm his approval of its pro-war editorial, immediately broke off all relations. In five political comments over the next three weeks, he

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explained the reasons to his *Novy Mir* readers, insisting that the *Forward* editor be expelled from the party.

Ackerman recognises that Trotsky's most critical role was as one of two representatives of the Socialist Party's anti-war left wing on a seven-man "special committee" established by the party in late February to draft a resolution clarifying its attitude to America's entry into the war against Germany.

Just before the committee convened, Hillquit pre-empted its deliberations in an interview with the *New York Times*, declaring, "if our armies are to be recruited by volunteer enlistments, the Socialists, as a whole, will refuse to enlist," but "if the armies are raised by conscription, of course we will have to serve as other citizens. I do not believe that the Socialists will advocate any general industrial strike to handicap the country in its war preparations. And I do not believe there will be any such strike."

In response, Trotsky and Louis Fraina, now editor of a new journal, *The Internationalist*, insisted that the Socialist Party's resolution had to include four points: 1) that the party denounce statements in the bourgeois media like Hillquit's, which pledged loyalty to America in case of war and the suppression of workers' struggles; 2) that the party, composed of internationalists, not patriots, denounce the concept of "national defence" as an excuse for war; 3) that the party differentiate itself from pacifists unwilling to fight for socialism; and 4) in the event of war, the party commit to not only voicing dissent, but to organising "mass action, including general strikes and street protests aimed at physically blocking conscription, troop movements and war industries."

"The storm raged for two weeks," Ackerman observes, between "Hillquit the pragmatist and Trotsky the revolutionary on the cusp of history." Finally, after several drafts, each rejected by Trotsky and Fraina, Hillquit and his majority agreed to incorporate the first three points, but not the fourth. Hillquit refused to accept illegal mass action to fight war. Trotsky and Fraina refused to budge. Instead, they prepared a dissenting Minority Report, which concluded; "No to 'civil peace'! No truce with the ruling class! War does not change the issue, but emphasizes it. War against capitalism! On with the class struggle!"

Trotsky had refused to compromise and he had succeeded in bringing Fraina with him. When the New York party membership convened to vote, the minority's fourth point became the main issue of contention. One member insisted that the party could not instruct "our American young men to resist the draft at the risk of being shot." In reply, Ackerman recounts, "one draft-age young man… shouted back that it was 'better to sacrifice yourself for your own cause than to be sacrificed by your enemies for an enemy's cause.'"

The majority resolution won the day, but only by a narrow margin. Those who voted for the Minority Resolution had defined the attitude of a genuine socialist tendency towards war; that it had to be centred on the unified struggle of the international working class against capitalism—above all, against the bourgeois state, and a refusal to accommodate to bourgeois legality.

Ackerman acknowledges that the Socialist Party membership's conflict over the resolution on war was a historic moment in the struggle for socialism in the United States. Many of those who voted with Trotsky and Fraina were later to split from the Socialist Party and form the nucleus of the Communist Party USA.

Ackerman highlights other enthralling features of Trotsky's New York stay: his meeting, for example, with the already legendary American socialist Eugene Debs, whom he joined on the platform of a mass anti-war rally in March. Debs made clear that he stood with Trotsky against Hillquit and the social patriots. This was important, because the veteran militant socialist represented broader layers of the American working class, unlike the majority of the Socialist Party's New York membership, which was largely made up of European political exiles and immigrants.

"Another new disciple," writes Ackerman, was the young James P. Cannon, from America's west, who spoke in March alongside Hillquit at a huge 15,000-strong rally at Madison Square Garden in celebration of the victory of the February Revolution in Russia. Differentiating himself from the Socialist Party leader, Cannon declared, "The house of Rockefeller and the house of Morgan will fall as has the house of Romanoff in Russia!" Eleven years later, in 1928, Cannon was to found the first section of the Trotskyist Left Opposition, which Trotsky had launched in 1923 to oppose the Stalinist bureaucracy, outside the Soviet Union.

As soon as word of the February Revolution reached the US, Trotsky and Natalya resolved to return to Russia as quickly as possible. In a series of fiery speeches, articles and interviews in New York, Trotsky insisted that the bourgeois revolution, which had just overthrown the Tsarist autocracy, was only the prelude to the socialist revolution, in which the working class would take political power. He had anticipated precisely this process as far back as 1905, in his Theory of Permanent Revolution, the significance of which escapes Ackerman, who mentions it only in passing.

At the end of March, some 800 well-wishers showed up to say farewell to Trotsky on the night before he and his family set sail for Russia via Halifax. This was to become a far more eventful and challenging journey than he, or anyone else, could have anticipated—and one that British intelligence, on the basis of its knowledge of Trotsky's political activities in New York, did everything it possibly could to prevent.

Many of those present at the "gala" had become political supporters. As Ackerman writes, while "no guest list from the night survives… by now Trotsky's followers had become a distinct voice in socialist circles." The Russian revolutionary, he points out, had grown a small group of Hillquit dissenters "into hundreds."

In his farewell speech to the assembled crowd, Trotsky apparently spoke for two hours, in both Russian and German, explaining that "when revolution calls, revolutionaries follow." According to the notes of a New York police spy who was present at the event, Trotsky concluded:

"I am going back to Russia to overthrow the Provisional Government there and to stop the war with Germany. I want you people here to organise and keep organising until you are able to overthrow the damned rotten capitalistic government of this country."

Trotsky, in a few short weeks, made an indelible impression on thousands of New York socialists, who avidly followed his activities in Russia. With evident pride, the *Bronx Home News* carried a front-page story reporting the victory of the October 1917 Revolution with the headline: "BRONX MAN LEADS RUSSIAN REVOLUTION."

Ackerman tells a remarkable story, and, with appropriate caveats, it deserves a wide audience. The author's empathy for "old" New York is vivid and deep, as is his fascination with Leon Trotsky.

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