

Trotsky's *My Life*: An imperishable contribution to Marxism and world literature

David North
1 June 2026

Mehring Verlag, the publishing house of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) in Germany, will publish this summer a new German-language edition of Leon Trotsky's autobiography My Life (Mein Leben). Written in 1929 the autobiography is a literary masterpiece and an essential document of revolutionary history. David North, Chairman of the Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and National Chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, has written a preface for the new edition.

My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography begins: "Our times again are rich in memoirs, perhaps richer than ever before. It is because there is so much to tell." The observation was apt. The decade of the 1920s witnessed the publication of numerous autobiographies by politicians who had played a major role in the events leading up to, during and in the aftermath of the First World War. There was not only so much to tell: there was so much to justify, explain away, and heap blame on. Winston Churchill's multi-volume *The World Crisis* accomplished all three tasks with his characteristically reactionary magniloquence. The memoirs of other political titans of the time rapidly faded from consciousness. For the most part, their books have enjoyed quiet and long-lasting retirement in used book stores, where they find few buyers, and public libraries, where they rest undisturbed. Online retailers have saved, perhaps, a few memoirists from oblivion. Even Churchill's *World Crisis* has almost met the same fate, and would have been totally forgotten had it not been for the fact that the Second World War provided him with an opportunity to celebrate his achievements in another set of memoirs 1 million words longer than the first.

Nearly one century after its publication in late 1929, *My Life* remains a work of undiminished significance. A great memoir must, of course, be very well written. It must also convey—through its recollection of social, political or psychological experiences—a sense of what it was to be alive at a particular time.

All these challenges were met by Trotsky. First, to describe *My Life* as merely "well written" is an understatement akin to referring to Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as an exciting depiction of military conflict. The reference to Tolstoy is not out of place. For all the differences in the circumstances of their early lives and the conditions they described, Trotsky's account of his youth in backward Yanovka bears comparison, as a work of art, to Count Tolstoy's recreation of life on the vast ancestral estate of Yasnaya Polyana. Indeed, Trotsky as a writer was profoundly influenced by the narrative sweep and intellectual depth of 19th-century Russian literature.

His reading, as Trotsky recounts in *My Life*, began as a seven-year-old. Trotsky was enthralled by works of Pushkin, Nekrasov and Tolstoy. He recalled the impact of his early reading on his emerging consciousness: "Every new book brought with it new obstacles, such as unfamiliar words, unintelligible human relationships and the vagueness and instability which separate fancy from reality."

Trotsky compared his childhood encounter with literature to "a night drive on the steppes: squeaking wheels and voices crossing one another, bonfires along the road flaring up in the darkness; everything seems familiar and yet one does not quite grasp its meaning. What is happening? Who is driving past and carrying what?" There follows a revelatory statement: "The awakened hunger to see, to know, to absorb, found relief in this insatiable swallowing of printed matter, in the hands and lips of a child ever reaching out for the cup of verbal fancy. Everything in my later life that was interesting or thrilling, gay or sad, was already present in my reading experiences as a hint, a promise, a slight and timid sketch in pencil or watercolor."

It was through literature that the young Lev Davidovich first obtained access to a world beyond the limits of provincial Yanovka. Later, his own experience—the increasingly complex interaction of the individual with society, the workers' movement, Marxist theory and socialist politics, and the felt weight of Russian and world events—transformed the timid sketch "in pencil or watercolor" into Trotsky's intensely detailed, vivid and quasi-cinematic panorama of a life lived amidst war and revolution.

Trotsky's stature as a writer was not contested. Even the *New York Times*, in a lengthy review, conceded: "Whatever may be thought of Trotsky as a theorist or revolutionary, there is no denying his unusual literary powers, and the vivid experiences which have filled his life give him an opportunity to show his literary abilities to their best."^[1]

But the significance of Trotsky's autobiography was not then and cannot be attributed today only to its literary brilliance. Its enduring place in world literature is derived above all from the immense historical role of its author. Trotsky's life was that of a man who had played a decisive role in the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the founding of the first workers state, the building of the Red Army and its victory over the counterrevolution, and the creation of the Communist International.

This unique element was recognized in contemporary reviews of *My Life* in Germany as well as in France and the United States. The renowned journalist, Emil Ludwig, wrote in the *Berliner Tageblatt*: "A great writer has portrayed his fantastic life here in such a way that I cannot understand why anyone still reads novels—let alone writes them." ["Ein großer Schriftsteller hat hier sein phantastischen leben so geschildert, daß ich nicht begreife, warum man noch immer Romane liest oder gar schreibt."]

Even those who made clear their opposition to Trotsky's politics, acknowledged the extraordinary character of *My Life*. Wolf Zucker, an associate of Walter Benjamin, wrote in *Die Literarische Welt* that "I unhesitatingly call [*My Life*] the most important work of this past quarter-century..."^[2]

Similarly, after stressing with undisguised bitterness his hostility to Trotsky, the French liberal anti-Marxist Élie Halévy still acknowledged, "With these reservations made, it goes without saying what an important historical document the autobiography of such a man constitutes on a multiple of points of detail."^[3]

In a lengthy review published in *Current History*, Alexander Bakshy, a

noted drama critic and associate of Eugene O'Neill, wrote that Trotsky's memoir "is undoubtedly a historical document of exceptional importance besides being a literary masterpiece in the art of biography with few to equal it in brilliant characterization, mordant wit and stirring incident—a book which no student of the dramatic changes in present-day Russia can afford to leave unread."^[4]

My Life was certainly an achievement all the more extraordinary for the conditions under which it had been written. After five years of unrelenting struggle against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet state, and under conditions of intensifying persecution, Trotsky was expelled by the Stalinist bureaucracy from the USSR. Having failed to destroy the Left Opposition by exiling its leader in 1928 to Alma Ata near the border with China, Stalin believed that Trotsky's influence would be effectively suppressed if he were isolated in Turkey. Trotsky was notified of this decision on January 20, 1929. Asked to acknowledge his receipt of this order, he wrote on the document placed before him that the decision of the GPU was "criminal in substance and illegal in form." He was given less than two days to pack his belongings, of which the most important were his manuscripts and books. The long journey into foreign exile began under forbidding conditions, which he described in the penultimate chapter of his memoir:

At dawn on the twenty-second, my wife, my son, and I, with the escort, set off in an autobus which drove us along a smooth, firm road of snow to the top of the Kurday mountain range. On the summit, there were heavy snowdrifts and a strong wind. The powerful tractor that was to tow us over the Kurday pass got lodged in the snow up to its neck together with the seven automobiles it was towing. During the snowstorms, seven men and a good many horses were frozen to death on the pass. It took us more than seven hours to advance about 30 kilometers. Along the drifted road we encountered many sleighs with their shafts sticking up, much material for the Turkestan-Siberian railway, in the process of construction, many kerosene tanks—all deep in the snow. Men and horses had found shelter from the nearby winter camps of the Kirghizes.

While this journey was underway, hundreds of Left Oppositionists, many of them veteran leaders of the October Revolution, were being arrested. Trotsky, his wife Natalia and his son Lev finally arrived in Odessa in the evening of February 10. They were taken immediately to the harbor and placed aboard the steamship *Ilyich*. Two days later, the ship, whose only passengers were Trotsky, his wife, son and several GPU agents, entered the Bosphorus. Before disembarking in Turkey, Trotsky wrote a message to the country's president Kemal Atatürk:

Dear Sir: At the gate of Constantinople, I have the honor to inform you that I have crossed the Turkish frontier not of my own choice, and that I will cross the frontier only by submitting to force. I request you, Mr. President, to accept my appropriate sentiments.

L. Trotsky. February 12, 1929.

In the weeks that followed his arrival in Turkey, Trotsky—responding to innumerable inquiries about his expulsion from the Soviet Union—wrote a series of articles that recounted the events of the previous two months. They were eventually published as a pamphlet under the title, *What Happened and How?* Many of the important political issues relating to

Trotsky's fall from power, which were to be developed in greater detail in *My Life*, were initially presented in these essays. While not discounting the role played by bureaucratic intrigues, Trotsky insisted on their secondary character. "Compared to the essential question of the realignment of class forces and the progression of the various stages of the revolution, the question of personal groupings and combinations is only of secondary significance."^[5]

Anticipating claims that Stalin's victory was to be attributed to his formidable political skills, Trotsky described the leader of the bureaucracy as "the *most outstanding mediocrity in our party*." Trotsky placed Stalin's rise in the context of the decline of the revolutionary upsurge of the masses. He quoted the words of Helvetius: "Every period has its great men, and if these are lacking, it invents them."^[6] Trotsky did not ignore the sinister plotting and slanders that had been employed against him. But these could not explain why he lost power. "A political line that finds the cause of its defeat in the intrigues of its adversary is a blind and pathetic one," he wrote. "Intrigue is a particular kind of technical implementation of a task; it can only play a subordinate role. Great historical questions are resolved by the action of great social forces, not petty maneuvers."^[7]

The first weeks spent by Trotsky on the island of Büyükada, in the sea of Marmara, were hectic. He had to find and establish a residence from which he could conduct his work in accordance with his exacting rigor. In the midst of this task, Trotsky was contacted by numerous publishers anxious to secure rights to his literary work. Particular interest was expressed in an autobiography, which Trotsky had indicated an inclination to write. An excellent account of the origin and writing of *My Life* has been published by Wolfgang and Petra Lubitz, which may be accessed on their website, www.trotskyana.net. They state that work on the autobiography began no later than April 1929. After a certain amount of conflict between competing publishers, which is recounted in the Lubitz's essay, rights to the autobiography were obtained by the Berlin-based Fischer Verlag.

Trotsky set to work with his usual intensity. Though it seems likely that he had already begun drafting his manuscript while still in Alma Ata, the bulk of the writing was done in Büyükada. The speed with which Trotsky wrote *My Life* is astonishing; and it is further evidence of his highly disciplined capacity for systematic work. Even while he worked on the autobiography, Trotsky continued to write on developments in the Soviet Union, comment on world events, and provide theoretical and political direction for the work of the emerging International Left Opposition.

By May Trotsky had written a substantial portion of the text. The autobiography was completed in September 1929. His work received critical support from Alexandra Ramm, the wife of Franz Pfemfert, the socialist journalist and editor of the radical-left *Die Aktion*. A significant intellectual figure in her own right, Ramm not only translated the Russian text into German. She assisted in Trotsky's research, and functioned as his literary representative, handling the relationship with Fischer Verlag. Her translation, a work of art, required that Ramm successfully adapt Trotsky's Russian syntax into an appropriate German sentence structure.

Trotsky, who was fluent in German, followed her work carefully. There were occasional conflicts over translation decisions. The extent of their collaboration is recorded in the scores of letters exchanged between Trotsky and Ramm. Moreover, a close friendship developed between Trotsky and both Ramm and Franz Pfemfert. In a postscript to the foreword to the German edition, Trotsky paid warm tribute, dated September 14, 1929, to his translator: "In presenting this book to the German reader, I wish to note that Alexandra Ramm has been not only the translator of the Russian original, but has moreover taken constant care for the fate of the book. I extend to her here my sincere thanks."

In the years that followed the publication of *My Life*, Ramm and Pfemfert experienced the bitter hardships that befell opponents of fascism and Stalinism. In March 1933, following the elevation of Hitler into

power, they fled Germany. Ramm and Pfemfert first settled in Czechoslovakia, where they tried to sustain themselves by running a photography studio. Their situation was precarious. The substantial pro-Nazi presence in the Sudeten region where they lived exposed them to constant danger. Ramm and Pfemfert, whose relation to Trotsky was well known, were despised by the Czech Stalinists. In October 1936 they moved to Paris, where Ramm worked on the translation of Trotsky's *The Crimes of Stalin*.

When war broke out in September 1939, the French Third Republic interned the Pfemferts as German "enemy aliens." Franz was sent to a camp near Bordeaux, while Alexandra was held separately at a camp in Gurs, in southern France. Both escaped and were reunited in Perpignan in the summer of 1940. From there they made their way through Marseille to Lisbon, then to New York, and finally to Mexico City, arriving in the spring of 1941. Trotsky had already been assassinated in August 1940, in Coyoacán, a suburb of Mexico City.

Following the death of her husband in 1954, Ramm returned to Germany. She spent the final years of her life in Berlin. Still devoted to the legacy of Trotsky, Ramm managed to persuade the Fischer Verlag to bring out a new edition of *My Life* and an abridged edition of his monumental *History of the Russian Revolution* in 1963, which she had also translated.

Alexandra Ramm died in West Berlin on January 17, 1963 at the age of 79, and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Berlin-Charlottenburg. Her life is the subject of a biography titled *Alexandra Ramm-Pfemfert: Ein Gegenleben* [*Alexandra Ramm-Pfemfert: A Counter-Life*], by Julijana Ranc, which was published in 2004. The book's appendix includes 54 letters from Ramm and Pfemfert to Trotsky and 33 letters from Trotsky to them. It is appropriate, on the occasion of the publication of a new edition of *Mein Leben* to pay tribute to the memory of Ramm and Pfemfert, who contributed so significantly to the publication of Trotsky's memoir.

Trotsky's autobiography was written at a critical turning point in his life and world history. The Wall Street crash, which was to usher in the Great Depression and the ensuing catastrophes of the 1930s, occurred just a few weeks before the publication of *My Life*. The tempo of its creation as well as its tone—had the work been a symphony, it might have borne the marking "alla marcia con fuoco" [in the manner of a march, with fire]—reflected the circumstances of its production.

It was suggested by Isaac Deutscher, in the final volume of his biographical trilogy, that *My Life* was written too early. For all its vitality as a work of literature, it was, Deutscher claimed, the work of a man who did not yet fully grasp the scale and decisive character of his political defeat. The standpoint and tone of the work was too optimistic. Trotsky wrote as a man who did not accept the fact that he had lost the fight against Stalin. Deutscher compared Trotsky to Shelley, "who could not bear that his Prometheus should end by humbling himself before Jupiter..." The biographer goes so far as to accuse Trotsky "of a certain superficiality in the writer's view of his own fortunes, the superficiality characteristic of the protagonist of a tragedy just before disasters assault him from all sides."^[8]

Deutscher implies that if Trotsky had delayed the writing of his autobiography and witnessed the catastrophes of the 1930s, he would not have been able to maintain the tone of confidence and optimism with which *My Life* is infused. A memoir written in 1939, rather than 1929, would have been a far darker work, more admitting of doubt about the viability of the cause to which Trotsky had dedicated his life. This criticism reflected Deutscher's belief that Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism was doomed from the start and that his founding of a Fourth International was a quixotic enterprise.

In any event, the timing of Trotsky's decision to write *My Life* was not of an arbitrary character. It was determined by the interaction of political and personal circumstances. As he explained in the foreword, "The very

fact of its coming into the world is due to a pause in the author's active political life. One of the unforeseen, though not accidental, stops in my life has proved to be Constantinople. Here I am camping—but not for the first time—and patiently waiting for what is to follow. The life of a revolutionary would be quite impossible without a certain amount of 'fatalism.' In one way or another, the Constantinople interval has proved the most appropriate moment for me to look back before circumstances allow me to move forward."

Trotsky's autobiography had nothing of the character of a nostalgic review of "lost time," or an elegiac meditation on his past and thoughts. The book continued "the struggle to which my whole life is devoted. Describing, I also characterize and evaluate; narrating, I also defend myself, and more often attack. It seems to me that this is the only method of making an autobiography objective in the higher sense, that is, of making it the most adequate expression of personality, conditions, and epoch." Trotsky rejected an attitude and tone of "pretended indifference" under the deceptive and hypocritical mask of pseudo-objectivity. "Since I have submitted to the necessity of writing about myself—nobody has yet succeeded in writing an autobiography without writing about himself—I can have no reason to hide my sympathies or antipathies, my loves or my hates."

My Life, as virtually all of Trotsky's writings, has an intensely polemical character. But this was not a stylistic affectation or only an expression of his personality. Polemics, as he explained, "reflects the dynamics of that social life which is built entirely on contradictions ... Such is our epoch. We have all grown up with it. We breathe it and live by it. How can we help being polemical if we want to be true to our period in the mode of the day?"

An attempt to summarize *My Life* would deprive the reader of the impact, intellectual and aesthetic, of one's first encounter with his narrative. I will provide only a brief overview of the autobiography.

The first five chapters of *My Life* are devoted to a recounting of his childhood, youth, and adolescence. Trotsky recalls with fondness, empathy, distaste and, not infrequently, scathing humor the vast cast of characters who populated the universe of his childhood.

The great Marxist theoretician did not impose, retroactively, an ideological schema that asserts a direct and obvious link between the great political events of the day and his childhood experiences. Rather, Trotsky's narration recreates the development of a child's consciousness, consisting of new and unmediated experiences, with little understanding of their broader significance and relation to the world beyond the Yanovka of his early childhood and the Odessa of his adolescence. The social and class relations are not presented with sociological precision, but indicated and inferred. When necessary, for purpose of clarification, Trotsky introduces additional information that illuminates the broader social context.

The chapters that follow recount a life of epic drama. But even if one were to abstract the text from its autobiographical form, *My Life* would still stand as a major document of 20th century history. Its narrative sweeps across the Russian Revolution of 1905, the outbreak of World War I and the collapse of the Second International, the eruption of the February Revolution, the Bolshevik seizure of power, the Russian Civil War, the death of Lenin, the ensuing struggle within the Soviet regime, the British General Strike and the 1927 defeat of the Chinese Revolution.

Trotsky's understanding of historical events enabled him to locate his own activity within the context of the objective forces that shaped the destiny of humanity. This level of historical insight—what in theoretical terms may be described as the identification of the universal in the particular—was also a defining element of Trotsky's literary genius. He recognized in even the incidental the working out of the logic of history. It imparted to his characterizations of individuals a devastating accuracy. Trotsky related the specific features of their personalities to broader social

interests and political tendencies.

This gift is displayed in Trotsky's portraits of the leaders of the Second International. He seems to have met, conversed with or at least heard all the great figures of the pre-1914 era: August Bebel, Georgi Plekhanov, Karl Kautsky, Julius Martov, Jean Jaurès, Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding, Victor Adler, Karl Renner and even Ramsay MacDonald. When he encountered great qualities in political figures, even among his opponents, Trotsky did not hide his admiration. Recalling Jaurès, Trotsky wrote of the great orator: "With a mighty force as elemental as a waterfall, he combined great gentleness, which shone in his face like a reflection of a higher spiritual culture. He would send rocks tumbling down, he would thunder and bring the earthquake, but himself he never deafened."

Having spent the years 1907 to 1914 in Vienna, the leaders of the Austrian Social Democratic Party made a far different impression on him. Their political capitulation in 1914 was foreshadowed in their personalities. The eminent Austrian social democrats were learned men, but Trotsky detected the "self-satisfaction" and faint "philistinism" of those who were "the type that was farthest from that of the revolutionary." When he told Renner that the next Russian revolution would deliver power to the proletariat, the reply—offered with "deadly civility"—revealed a man "as far from revolutionary dialectics as the most conservative Egyptian pharaoh." This assessment was vindicated by Renner's subsequent endorsement of the Nazi takeover of Vienna in 1938.

Victor Adler's quip preferring apocalyptic prophecy to historical materialism, though offered in jest, betrayed for Trotsky a skepticism that "tolerated everything," above all the nationalism that would corrode Austrian Social Democracy to its core.

Against this gallery Trotsky set Karl Liebknecht—not a theorist but "a man of action," impulsive and heroic, possessed of "real political intuition" and "incomparable courage of initiative."

The year 1917 began with Trotsky arriving in New York after being expelled from Europe as a consequence of his revolutionary anti-war journalism. It ended with Trotsky, back in Petrograd, organizing the overthrow of the Provisional government. Trotsky's account of the events of 1917 should be sufficient to cure even the most hardcore case of political skepticism, which is rooted in the conviction that change is impossible, and, if it does come, it will be only for the worse.

This is followed by Trotsky's account of the negotiations with the German Imperial government at Brest-Litovsk. An element of the surreal pervaded the political atmosphere: "The circumstances of history," writes Trotsky, "willed that the delegates of the most revolutionary regime ever known to humanity should sit at the same diplomatic table with the representatives of the most reactionary caste among all the ruling classes." The negotiations generated intense pressure within the Bolshevik Party, with a substantial faction resisting Lenin's demand for an immediate end to the war, despite the onerous demands of the Germans. Trotsky sought to utilize the negotiations as a means of exposing the viciously predatory character of German imperialism and, thereby, intensifying the insurrectionary mood within the country's working class. With the aim of forestalling a split in the Bolshevik Party, where Lenin's position was in a clear minority, Trotsky proposed that the Bolshevik delegation declare the war over without signing a treaty.

After recovering from the shock produced by Trotsky's declaration, the German military resumed its offensive. But now, with the critical vote supplied by Trotsky, Lenin secured the majority that he required to sign the treaty with Germany. Later, the Stalinists would seek to portray Trotsky's role in the Brest-Litovsk negotiations as a combination of recklessness and opposition to Lenin. But Trotsky's astute and principled conduct of the negotiations is substantiated in the detailed account provided by Alexander Rabinowitch in *The Bolsheviks in Power*. Rabinowitch's meticulous archival research exemplifies a commitment to historical truth, which is a characteristic found

infrequently in the field of Soviet studies. The willingness to falsify the history of the Bolshevik Revolution and slander its leaders, first and foremost Lenin and Trotsky, offers the surest road to prestigious academic posts and lucrative book contracts.

Trotsky relates his complex political and personal relations with Lenin over a period of 20 years, from their initial encounter in London in 1902 until the final weeks of their collaboration in opposition to Stalin's conduct as general secretary in the winter of 1922-23. Trotsky did not conceal his differences with Lenin, and rejected the obsequious tone of deification that the Stalinist regime, in its own interests, imposed in all references to Lenin following his death in 1924. "Yes," Trotsky writes, "Lenin was as much of a genius as a man can be. But he was not an automatic reckoning machine that makes no mistakes. He made them less often than anyone else in his position would; but he made them all the same, and grave ones, at that, in accord with the titanic scope of his work."

The five chapters on the civil war that followed the October Revolution provides an extraordinary insight into the creation of the Red Army and how it achieved victory. It demands careful study, as it provides lessons that may prove to be of great value in the years ahead. Trotsky's account is distinctive for combining the political, organizational, and operational dimensions of war-making in compressed, vivid prose. Writing as both protagonist and historian, he explains, without a trace of self-aggrandizement, what revolutionary military command actually involves.

Trotsky had no prior military training of any kind. He had been a journalist and a revolutionary exile. But he created an army of roughly 5 million men from nothing, in the aftermath of the collapse of the tsarist army and amid widespread chaos, under blockade, against multiple White armies and foreign interventionist forces, and led it to victory in under three years. By any reasonable historical standard that is an extraordinary achievement. Trotsky was able to intervene in situations of institutional chaos, identify the two or three structural decisions that mattered, impose them against resistance, find competent people to execute them, and sustain the whole army through personal energy and political authority. His armored train was the emblem of this: it was simultaneously a mobile headquarters, a printing press, a tribunal, a supply depot and a political instrument of authority.

The final chapters of *My Life*, which focus on the struggle that developed inside the Bolshevik Party, are the most directly polemical. The retrospective tone of the memoirist shifts decisively to one of active combat. Trotsky is dealing with events that had transpired during the previous six years, and which narrate a political struggle that was still unfolding. It begins with the last stage of Lenin's illness in 1923 and concludes with Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1929. In these chapters Trotsky answers the question: "How could you lose power?" To those, both in Trotsky's time and to this day, whose concept of politics is framed in conventional pragmatic terms, the loss of power is generally viewed as the outcome of mistakes, a failure to engage in skillful and timely maneuvers.

But losing political power, as Trotsky explained, is not "the same thing as losing a watch or a notebook." Particularly when one analyzes the shifts in political power in different periods or stages of a revolution, the causes of the rise and fall of tendencies and individuals must be found in objective conditions. A mighty eruption of the class struggle in Russia in 1917 raised Trotsky and Lenin from obscurity to the pinnacle of power. This transformation in their political and personal situation occurred with such an astonishing speed that Lenin remarked to Trotsky, on the night of the Bolshevik insurrection, "*Es schwindelt*" ["It makes one dizzy"]. An opposite and more protracted process of political stasis, stagnation and decline in revolutionary fervor—a product of the defeats suffered by the European working class beyond the borders of the Soviet Union, the isolation and political exhaustion of the proletariat, the bureaucratization

of the state and ruling party and the strengthening of a petty-bourgeois stratum following the adoption in 1921 of the New Economic Policy (NEP)—underlay the decline in Trotsky's influence and power.

Even before Stalin provided the struggle against Trotsky and the internationalist strategy of permanent revolution with the reactionary program of socialism in one country, there was a perceptible change in the political mood and lifestyle of the party leadership. An atmosphere of self-satisfaction, triviality and moral decline became pervasive and signaled a change in the balance of power within the party. In a brilliant passage, Trotsky notes that informal conversations among other members of the ruling Politburo would suddenly stop when he entered the room. "This was, if you like, a definite indication that I had begun to lose power." Of course, the death of Lenin was a major element in the isolation of Trotsky. Their collaboration in the exercise of leadership was itself a powerful objective factor in the relation of forces. But even Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, mused in 1926 that Lenin, too, might have been imprisoned by the bureaucratized regime.

It was in the environment of bureaucratic reaction that the slander campaign against Trotsky was unleashed. Beginning with the lie that Trotsky "underestimated the peasantry," the aim of this campaign was to crush Trotsky personally, legitimize a break with the program of the October Revolution and the perspective of permanent revolution, and to replace the interests of the Soviet and international working class with those of the nationalist bureaucracy, led by Stalin.

Trotsky relates the different stages of the struggle that raged within the Communist Party. Throughout this struggle the critique of the policies of the Stalinist regime by Trotsky and the Left Opposition was vindicated by events. Stalin had no other means to counter the arguments of the Opposition other than repression, culminating with the expulsion of Trotsky and his supporters from the Communist Party and Communist International in 1927, the exile of Trotsky to Alma Ata in 1928, and, finally, Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1929.

Trotsky concluded his autobiography with a chapter titled "The Planet Without A Visa." Following his expulsion from the Soviet Union, Trotsky sought to obtain the right to enter a West European country. Following a statement by the president of the German Reichstag to the effect that Germany would grant him asylum, Trotsky requested a visa. However, the government promptly disavowed the Reichstag president's statement. Trotsky would not be allowed to enter Germany. Requests for a visa were also rejected by Britain, France and Norway. "I must admit," he wrote, "that the roll-call of the western European democracies on the question of the right of asylum has given me, aside from other things, more than a few merry minutes. At times it seemed as if I were attending a 'pan-European' performance of a one-act comedy on the theme of the principles of democracy."

Answering those who wondered how Trotsky managed to cope with his fall from power, he explained: "I do not measure the historical process by the yardstick of one's personal fate. On the contrary, I appraise my fate objectively and live it subjectively, only as it is inextricably bound up with the course of social development." He did not view his life as a tragedy. Rather, "I know the change in two chapters of the revolution."

But what of the revolution itself? Was it justified? What had it achieved? Trotsky offered this appraisal:

The working class in Russia, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, made an attempt to effect a reconstruction of life that would exclude the possibility of humanity's going through these periodic fits of sheer insanity, and would lay the foundations of a higher culture. That was the sense of the October Revolution. To be sure, the problem it set itself has not yet been solved. But in its very essence, this problem demands many decades. Moreover, the

October Revolution should be considered as the starting-point of the newest history of humanity as a whole.

The German edition of *My Life* was published the same month as Trotsky's 50th birthday. As monumental as his achievements as a central leader of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and as the builder of the Red Army and "organizer of victory" in the civil war, Trotsky's greatest work, both as a writer and revolutionary, still lay ahead. During the four years on Büyükkada, Trotsky not only wrote *The History of the Russian Revolution*. He also produced a series of political essays, which analyzed with unequalled foresight the threat posed by the rise of fascism in Germany. Trotsky subjected the ultra-left policy of "social fascism" advanced by the Stalinist German Communist Party (KPD) and Communist International to withering criticism.

Following Hitler's rise to power in 1933 as a consequence of the catastrophic policies of the Stalinists, Trotsky issued the call for the building of the Fourth International. In July 1933, Trotsky finally obtained permission to enter France, which he was compelled to leave in 1935. The Norwegian government finally allowed him to enter the country. In early August 1936, Trotsky completed *The Revolution Betrayed*, which remains to this day the greatest analysis of the degeneration of the Soviet workers state and the counterrevolutionary character of the Stalinist regime.

This analysis established that the survival of the workers state required the overthrow of the Soviet bureaucracy and the reestablishment of workers democracy through a political revolution. Within weeks, Trotsky's condemnation of the regime was vindicated with the staging of the first of three Moscow Trials, which marked the beginning of the Terror and the genocidal extermination of virtually the entire cadre of Bolshevism, the socialist leaders of the working class and the most advanced representatives of the socialist intelligentsia.

Under pressure from the Stalinist regime, the Social Democratic government of Norway placed Trotsky in solitary confinement to prevent him from replying to the monstrous lies spewing out from Moscow, which claimed that Trotsky was an agent of fascism. In December, Trotsky was granted asylum by the Mexican government led by President Lázaro Cárdenas. Trotsky and Natalia Sedova arrived in Mexico on January 9, 1937. He immediately issued a public denunciation of the trials in Moscow and called for the creation of an international "countertrial." In a speech delivered in English on January 30, recorded and preserved on film, Trotsky declared:

Stalin's trial against me is built upon false confessions, extorted by modern Inquisitorial methods, in the interest of the ruling clique. *There are no crimes in history more terrible in intention or execution than the Moscow trials of Zinoviev-Kamenev and of Radek-Pyatakov.* These trials develop not from communism, not from socialism, but from Stalinism, that is, from the unaccountable despotism of the bureaucracy over the people!

What is my principal task now? To reveal the *truth*. To show and to demonstrate that the true criminals hide under the cloak of the accusers.

Trotsky declared that a counter-trial "is necessary to cleanse the atmosphere of the germs of deceit, slander, falsification, and frame-ups, whose source is Stalin's police, the GPU, which has fallen to the level of the Nazi Gestapo."^[9]

A Commission of Inquiry was formed under the chairmanship of the American philosopher John Dewey. It traveled to Coyoacán, where Trotsky lived in a villa owned by the great muralist, Diego Rivera. In

sessions held from April 10 through April 17, Trotsky answered questions posed by members of the Commission and reviewed the entire course of his political career. In his final statement, which was delivered in English, Trotsky stated:

The experience of my life, in which there has been no lack either of successes or failures, has not only not destroyed my faith in the clear, bright future of mankind, but, on the contrary, has given it indestructible temper. This faith in reason, in truth, in human solidarity, which at the age of eighteen I took with me into the workers' quarters of the provincial Russian town of Nikolaev—this faith I have preserved fully and completely.^[10]

In December 1937, following an exhaustive review of Trotsky's testimony, a vast array of documents and the transcripts of the trials in Moscow, the Commission issued its findings. It declared Trotsky "Not Guilty" and branded the Moscow Trials as "Frame-ups."

Notwithstanding the verdict of the Dewey Commission (as the Commission of Inquiry was widely known), substantial numbers of liberal intellectuals continued to endorse the judicial integrity of the Moscow Trials. This was the era of the "Popular Front," the alliance of liberalism with the Soviet secret police, the GPU. In exchange for Stalinist support for capitalist governments in Europe and the United States, the middle-class liberal intelligentsia gave their assent to the murder of revolutionists by the Soviet regime.

As Trotsky prepared for the founding of the Fourth International, the Stalinist regime launched a violent campaign against its leadership. In July 1937, Erwin Wolf, who had worked closely with Trotsky in Norway, was kidnapped and murdered by the GPU. Two months later, Ignace Reiss, who had defected from the GPU and declared his solidarity with the Fourth International, was assassinated in Switzerland. In February 1938, Trotsky's son and closest political collaborator, Lev Sedov, was murdered in Paris. In July 1938, Rudolf Klement, was also assassinated in Paris, just two months before the scheduled founding congress of the Fourth International, of which he was the secretary.

Amidst all these tragic events, Trotsky carried out what he viewed to be the most important task of his life: defending the political program of Marxism and ensuring the survival of the socialist movement among a new generation of workers and youth. By the 1930s there was no one else left to uphold and pass on the banner of world socialist revolution. Writing in a diary notation dated March 25, 1935, Trotsky stated that his role in the 1917 insurrection and subsequent civil war, while certainly important, was not necessarily "indispensable." This writer is inclined to disagree with that assessment. There is ample evidence that Trotsky's role in the conquest of power and the civil war was of decisive importance. But while that may be the subject of historical debate, Trotsky's appraisal of his role in the 1930s, from the standpoint of the defense of Marxism and the future of socialism, was entirely justified.

But now my work is "indispensable" in the full sense of the word. There is no arrogance in this claim at all. The collapse of two Internationals has posed a problem which none of the leaders of these Internationals is at all equipped to solve. The vicissitudes of my personal fate have confronted me with this problem and armed me with important experience in dealing with it. There is no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with the revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third International. And I am in full agreement with Lenin (or rather Turgenev) that the worst vice is to be more than

55 years old! I need at least about five more years of uninterrupted work to ensure the succession.^[11]

Trotsky was to have just over five more years. He died on August 21, 1940 from wounds inflicted by a Stalinist assassin. This crime deprived the international working class of the last surviving leader of the October Revolution and greatest representative of the classical Marxist program and tradition. There was no one left alive who equaled Trotsky in terms of experience, let alone political genius. But the work he carried out in the final years of his life saved the Marxist movement from extinction. Between the completion of his autobiography and his assassination in 1940, Trotsky created the Fourth International and defined the fundamental tasks of the socialist movement in the modern epoch.

Surviving Lenin by 16 years, Trotsky analyzed, responded to and even anticipated the great political events that determined the course of the class struggle throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. Trotsky lived long enough to witness the degeneration of the Soviet Union, the emergence of fascism, the general putrefaction of bourgeois democracy, the treachery of bourgeois nationalist movements in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the rise of American imperialism to a position of global dominance, and, finally, the outbreak of World War II. The latter event confirmed the central premise of the theory of permanent revolution, that the only viable strategic response to the contradictions of global capitalism and the nation-state system is the world socialist revolution.

This historically necessary task, upon whose completion depends the survival of humanity, requires the resolution of the crisis of revolutionary leadership in the working class. The Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution, was founded to carry out this task. Whatever the outcome of the war, Trotsky anticipated a protracted period of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary upheavals. With astonishing prescience and wisdom, Trotsky wrote in May 1940:

The capitalist world has no way out, unless a prolonged death agony is so considered. It is necessary to prepare for long years, if not decades, of war, uprisings, brief interludes of truce, new wars, and new uprisings. A young revolutionary party must base itself on this perspective. History will provide it with enough opportunities and possibilities to test itself, to accumulate experience, and to mature. The swifter the ranks of the vanguard are fused the more the epoch of bloody convulsions will be shortened, the less destruction will our planet suffer. But the great historical problem will not be solved in any case until a revolutionary party stands at the head of the proletariat. The question of tempos and time intervals is of enormous importance; but it alters neither the general historical perspective nor the direction of our policy. The conclusion is a simple one: it is necessary to carry on the work of educating and organizing the proletarian vanguard with ten-fold energy. Precisely in this lies the task of the Fourth International.^[12]

Written 86 years ago, this perspective applies with even greater force to the present-day world. And it is for this reason that Trotsky, a gigantic figure in the history of the 20th century, remains an immense presence in the politics of the 21st. His name evokes the theory (permanent revolution), strategy (world socialist revolution) and organization (Fourth International) of Marxism as the revolutionary movement of the working class in the contemporary world. Trotskyism is the Marxism of the 21st century.

The specter of Trotsky and Trotskyism haunts the ruling elites and their retinue of journalists and academics. The October Revolution will never

be forgotten, and Trotsky will never be forgiven for leading it.

Biographies denouncing, belittling and falsifying Trotsky's life are a staple of the publishing industry. The works of British Professors Robert Service, Ian Thatcher and Geoffrey Swain exemplify the genre. These works justify Trotsky's remark: "The thing that amazes one on occasions when public opinion is touched to the quick is man's capacity for lying." It must be said that in this activity Service and Thatcher display a level of skill, or should one say shamelessness, that is exceptional. Service, with the aim of emphasizing Trotsky's Jewish background, changes his first name from Lev to Leiba. Thatcher, for the same reason, fiddles with Trotsky's surname. He repeatedly refers to Trotsky as "Bronstein," a name that the revolutionary never used after adopting in 1902 the political pseudonym with which he became world famous. And Thatcher uses the Bronstein surname whenever he is describing Trotsky's movements from one place of exile to another. Behold the "wandering Jew"! The inspiration for this exercise in literary defamation is none other than the aforementioned Winston Churchill, who devoted an essay to the exiled revolutionary titled "Leon Trotsky, alias Bronstein."

The most persistent theme in the discrediting of Trotsky is his portrayal as a deeply flawed and even repulsive personality, whose alleged intellectual arrogance and sneering contempt for his comrades in the party leadership was the principal cause of his downfall. In the entire historiography of Trotsky biographies, there is no story about Trotsky that has been told as often as that of his immersion in a French novel during meetings of the party leadership, thereby conveying his indifference to the daily mundane tasks.

The image conveyed by this story is a striking one: party leaders, gathered around a table, work through their agenda. But there is Trotsky, bored and indifferent, his nose buried in a novel, and a French, rather than Russian, novel at that. What an ostentatious display of cultural superiority! What could be better calculated to incite hostility? There is only one problem with this story. It is a piece of political fiction, originally concocted by Trotsky's factional opponents. There is not one retelling of the tale of the French novel that identifies a witness to Trotsky's alleged violation of Politburo protocol or any other credibly documented substantiation.

In the best-known telling of the story, which set the precedent for its endless repetition, its apocryphal character is acknowledged. In *The Prophet Unarmed*, the second volume of his biography of Trotsky, published originally in 1959, Deutscher claimed to have been told this story during a visit to Moscow. He does not identify the person who told him the story, and immediately casts doubts on the veracity of the tale. But Deutscher states, "Even if the anecdote was invented, it was well invented: it conveys something of the man's temper."^[13]

In the numerous subsequent retellings of the story, Deutscher's disclaimer is ignored. The "well invented" anecdote is accepted as an indisputable fact and unanswerable indictment. The ambiguities and inconsistencies of the story are passed over in silence. Sometimes the scene of Trotsky's impertinence is identified as the central committee. Other accounts claim it occurred in the smaller and more intimate setting of the Politburo. No matter. The "well invented" tale serves its purpose. First, the story makes Trotsky the architect of his own ruin. Second, it subtly turns Trotsky's high cultural level and socialist internationalism against him. Would the story have had the same effect if it had placed a Russian, rather than a French, novel in his hand? Third, it shifts attention away from the political issues, elaborated in *My Life*, underlying Trotsky's fall from power.

In the final analysis, the lies that are directed against Trotsky are aimed at discrediting socialism and, therefore, the very possibility of an alternative to capitalism. Trotsky's life and political conceptions testify to the fact that the degeneration of the Soviet Union was not inevitable; that Stalinism was a reactionary repudiation of socialism, and that there was an

alternative to the brutal dictatorship that led ultimately to the dissolution of the workers' state and the restoration of capitalism. The strategy and program for which Trotsky fought represented that alternative.

My Life could just as well have been given the title, *Our Epoch*. Even after the passage of a century, the autobiography has not been overtaken by history. We are living in a world that Trotsky would understand. The technology has advanced enormously, but the problems remain the same in their essence and have grown far worse in their scale. Though the death agony of this social system has been more protracted than Trotsky might have expected, his historical prognosis retains its validity. The capitalist system must give way to socialism.

To conclude with the words of Trotsky, "This is so clear, that even the professors of history will understand it, though only after many years."

April 20, 1930.

"Leo Trotzki oder Die Dialektik der Revolution," *Die Literarische Welt*, 3 Januar 1930.

Revue des sciences politiques, vol. 54, 1931, p. 150.

June 1930, p. 474 .

Writings of Leon Trotsky 1929, (New York: Pathfinder, 1975), p. 36.

Ibid, p. 37.

Ibid, p. 43.

The Prophet Outcast – Trotsky: 1929-1940 (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), pp. 221-22.

Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37 (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), p. 179.

The Case of Leon Trotsky (New York: Merit Publications, 1968), pp. 584-85.

Diary in Exile (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 47.

Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40 (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), p. 218.

The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921-29, New York: Vintage Books, 1965, pp. 249-50 [Emphasis added].

[1] April 20, 1930.

[2] "Leo Trotzki oder Die Dialektik der Revolution," *Die Literarische Welt*, 3 Januar 1930.

[3] *Revue des sciences politiques*, vol. 54, 1931, p. 150.

[4] June 1930, p. 474 .

[5] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1929*, (New York: Pathfinder, 1975), p. 36.

[6] Ibid, p. 37.

[7] Ibid, p. 43.

[8] *The Prophet Outcast – Trotsky: 1929-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), pp. 221-22.

[9] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37* (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), p. 179.

[10] *The Case of Leon Trotsky* (New York: Merit Publications, 1968), pp. 584-85.

[11] *Diary in Exile* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 47.

[12] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), p. 218.

[13] *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921-29*, New York: Vintage Books, 1965, pp. 249-50 [Emphasis added].



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)