

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

David North
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This speech was delivered by World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board Chairman David North at the fourth annual international commemoration of Leon Trotsky's exile on the island of Büyükada (Prinkipo), Turkey, held Sunday, August 16 under the title "My Life, Written on Prinkipo, and Trotsky's Years in Exile." More than 100 people attended.

Speaking before North were Ula? Sevinç, national chairman of the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi-Dördüncü Enternasyonal (Socialist Equality Party-Fourth International), the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and Adalar deputy mayor Medine Pamuk, who spoke in place of Mayor Ali Ercan Akpolat, jailed since June in the Erdoğan government's campaign against opposition-run municipalities. North's remarks, recorded in advance and screened for the audience, were followed by a live question-and-answer session, which the WSWs will publish this week.

Permit me to express my appreciation to the leaders of the Adalar municipality for once again providing me with an opportunity to participate in an event that honors the legacy of Leon Trotsky, who spent four years on the island of Büyükada. This annual event is growing in international significance. Let us hope that the villa, where Trotsky lived more than 90 years ago, will be restored and become a living monument not only to the heroic revolutionary, but also, and above all, to the socialist ideals of human liberation to which he dedicated his life.

When I visited Büyükada in August 2024, the commemoration of Trotsky's years on this "island of tranquility" was organized under the leadership of Mayor Ali Ercan Akpolat. Notwithstanding our different political affiliations, I was deeply impressed by his integrity and sincere commitment to democratic ideals and historical truth. Therefore, I feel that it is my obligation, before proceeding to the delivery of my prepared remarks, to express my profound distress over Mayor Akpolat's imprisonment. The International Committee of the Fourth International has issued a public call for the immediate release of Mayor Akpolat and all other political prisoners. On behalf of the international working class and my comrades all over the world, I now repeat that demand.

At the same time, allow me to reiterate Comrade Ula?'s appeal on behalf of Bogdan Syrotiuk, the 27-year-old Trotskyist leader of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists in Ukraine and Russia. On August 10, he was sentenced by a fascistic court in Nikolaev in southern Ukraine to a prison term of 15 years for opposing the reactionary war being waged by the Kiev and Moscow regimes. The "crime" for which Comrade Bogdan has been sentenced is his call for the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian working class against the reactionary oligarchic capitalist regimes in Kiev and Moscow. Bogdan has already spent two years in prison, and his life is in danger. I appeal to you to support and fight for the release of Comrade Bogdan Syrotiuk.

The remarks that I have prepared for today's event will be focused on the literary masterpiece that Trotsky wrote on this island in 1929 during the first year of his exile from the Soviet Union: *My Life: An Attempt at an*

Autobiography.^[1]

Nearly one century after its publication, *My Life* remains a work of undiminished significance. It ranks among the greatest autobiographies of the 20th century for two reasons. First, Trotsky was a writer of genius. He stands alongside the great masters of Russian literature: Belinsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev and Herzen. Berthold Brecht commented that he believed that Trotsky might be the greatest of all contemporary European writers. That was an extraordinary tribute, considering the fact that among the great writers of that period were Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Robert Musil, Alfred Döblin, Stefan Zweig, Lion Feuchtwanger and Brecht himself.

But the stature of *My Life* in world literature is not only a matter of artistic form. The life recounted in the book was that of an extraordinary man who not only shaped the history of the last century but whose ideas continue to exercise far-reaching influence on the politics of the 21st century.

It is impossible to separate Trotsky the revolutionary from Trotsky the writer. His creative personality was an extraordinary fusion of political and literary genius. How could it be otherwise?

The brilliance of Trotsky's autobiography was the necessary expression in literary form of the historic stature of his thought and actions.

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*. 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."

Wolf Zucker, an associate of Walter Benjamin, wrote in *Die Literarische Welt*: "I unhesitatingly call [*My Life*] the most important work of this past quarter-century..."

My Life was 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 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 suppressed if he were isolated in Turkey. Trotsky was notified of his deportation 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.

Following an arduous and dangerous journey from Central Asia, Trotsky, his wife Natalia and his son Lev finally arrived in Odessa on 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 published under the title, *What Happened and How?* Many of the 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."

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."

Trotsky did not ignore the sinister plotting and slanders that had been employed against him. But intrigue 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."

The first weeks spent by Trotsky on the island of Büyükada were hectic. He had to find and establish a residence from which he could conduct his work in accordance with his exacting rigor. Work on the autobiography began no later than April 1929.

The speed with which Trotsky wrote *My Life* is astonishing; and it is further evidence of his exceptional self-discipline. 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.

The autobiography, completed in September 1929, was written at a 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 marcía con fuoco*" [in the manner of a march, with fire]—reflected the circumstances of its production.

Isaac Deutscher later argued 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 were too optimistic.

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 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 the Fourth International was a quixotic enterprise.

Moreover, Deutscher's pessimistic appraisal is refuted by Trotsky own words. In his final testament, written in February 1940, Trotsky wrote:

"My faith in the communist future of mankind is not less ardent, indeed it is firmer today, than it was in the days of my youth..."

"Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence and enjoy it to the full."

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." 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, like virtually all of Trotsky's writings, has an intensely polemical character. But this was not a stylistic affectation. 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?"

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 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.

This gift is displayed in Trotsky's portraits of the leaders of the Second International. He 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."

The leaders of the Austrian Social Democratic Party, among whom Trotsky spent the years 1907 to 1914 in Vienna, 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."

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, rooted in the conviction that change is impossible, and, if it does come, it will be only for the worse.

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 does not conceal his differences with Lenin and rejects 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 provide an extraordinary insight into the creation of the Red Army and how it achieved victory. They demand careful study, as they provide lessons that may prove to be of great value in the years ahead.

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. 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. 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." 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 with such 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—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."

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 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." He recounted the rejection of his requests for asylum by Germany, Britain, France and Norway. "I must admit," Trotsky 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."

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, 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 unequaled foresight the threat posed by the rise of fascism in Germany.

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 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.

Within weeks, Trotsky's condemnation of the regime was vindicated with the staging of the first of three Moscow Trials, which began almost exactly 90 years ago, on August 19, 1936. It marked the beginning of the Great 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 countertrial "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."

A Commission of Inquiry was formed under the chairmanship of the American philosopher John Dewey. In sessions held from April 10 through April 17, 1937, 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.

In December 1937, 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), many 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 as 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. In a diary entry dated March 25, 1935, Trotsky stated that his role in the 1917 insurrection and subsequent civil war, while certainly important, was not necessarily "indispensable." I 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 was entirely justified.

Trotsky was to live 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 classical Marxist program and tradition. There was no one left alive who equaled Trotsky in terms of experience, let alone political genius. 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.

Only three months before his death, 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.

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. They will never forget the October Revolution, and Trotsky will never be forgiven for leading it.

Biographies denouncing, belittling and falsifying Trotsky's life are a staple of the publishing industry. 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."

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 were the principal causes 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.

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 doubt on the veracity of the tale, writing, "Even if the anecdote was invented, it was well invented: it conveys something of the man's temper."

This suggestion that the "anecdote" was "well invented" clearly indicates that Deutscher himself did not believe the tale to be true.

But in the numerous subsequent retellings of the story, Deutscher's disclaimer is ignored. The "well invented" anecdote has become an indisputable fact and unanswerable indictment. The story makes Trotsky the architect of his own ruin; and 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."

These remarks are an abridged and modified version of the preface written by David North for the new German-language edition of Trotsky's My Life (Mein Leben), published by Mehring Verlag, which was published in full on the World Socialist Web Site on June 1, 2026 and can be accessed here: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2026/06/02/zjeb-j02.html>

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