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Reviews

A Reponse on Trotsky

- Reviews section -

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My thanks to Alan Wald for his generous and thoughtful review of Leon Trotsky. He raises important questions about violence, terror and authoritarianism in the period (1918-1921) that followed the heroic and inspiring Russian workers' revolution of 1917. Trotsky played a central role in both periods, and Alan asks "whether or not Trotsky's behavior in power aided or undercut his goal of achieving the socialist objective."

The obvious answer is that much of what Trotsky did aided the goal, but some things he did undercut the goal.

In the period in which Isaac Deutscher refers to him as "the prophet armed," Trotsky's leadership, his eloquence, his actions were among the decisive elements that made the 1917 revolution possible, that made possible the organization and victory of the Red Army which prevented the new Soviet republic from being drowned in blood, that helped to hold that republic together and move it forward in the transition from "war communism" to the New Economic Policy.

Also crucial in aiding the revolutionary socialist goal was the role Trotsky played in organizing and shaping the early Communist International, which as John Riddell has documented in his multi-volume work "for a time, despite limitations and contradictions" played a crucial role in rebuilding the revolutionary wing of the global working-class movement. Especially important was Trotsky's role in advancing the conception of the united front.

And of course, while still in power, after allowing himself to be drawn into a dubious authoritarianism, he again played a heroic role in defense of the revolutionary democratic and socialist goals for which the revolution had been made: pushing back against policies and practices associated with a crystallizing, rapidly expanding bureaucratic dictatorship.

Trotsky remains one of the outstanding representatives of the Bolshevik tradition, to which he made distinctive theoretical and practical contributions. It is a tradition that is essential for the development of a revolutionary socialist alternative to capitalism. There is much to learn from it.

Inherent in the dynamic realities of capitalism, historically and down to the present moment, have been a deep, intensive, expansive violence and authoritarianism and inhumanity. Such things threaten the elemental needs, the highest ideals, and the very survival of humanity.

While Trotsky represents invaluable resources that we cannot afford to set aside, the thrust of Alan's review demands a critical evaluation. This is required precisely because the struggle for a better world is a necessity. If we want to be effective, we need to learn all that we can – not only positive things to utilize but also lessons on what to avoid.

It is common to insist that the negative simply and decisively invalidates the positive "a position that serious activists cannot afford. But I believe, with Alan, that the negative needs to be identified, faced, and learned from by serious revolutionaries.

Contradictions of Victory

A Reponse on Trotsky

Reality is complicated. Embedded in some of his positive contributions, I believe, were negative aspects of Trotsky's practice "and Lenin's and the Bolsheviks'" that definitely undercut what Alan terms "the socialist objective."

I am against killing innocent people, and as he built the Red Army and led it to victory, Trotsky had innocent people killed. Some of these were young soldiers, terrified by horrifying violence and prospects of death, who therefore violated orders and ran away instead of doing battle with the enemy. Some were the military commanders and well-meaning political commissars of such units that disintegrated.

In such instances, Trotsky explains in *My Life*, executions were the order of the day. Such killing took place as part of ensuring the ultimate victory of the Red Army over the counter-revolution, but also part of a brutalization (and there are many other examples) that I believe undercut the socialist objective.

Revolution and civil war unleash incredible violence, sometimes indefensible and even sadistic acts, various kinds of abuses, again the killing of innocents, carried out all too often by people on "our side."

Lenin and Trotsky, whether or not they fully understood what would happen, moved to unleash what Arno Mayer has called "the furies," eloquently and horrifically described even in pro-Bolshevik accounts (such as Isaac Babel's stories about the Red cavalry, in which he participated, and Victor Serge's novel *The Conquered City*).

Mayer makes what I believe is a key point in his study *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions*: "Admittedly, the way the Bolsheviks took power was consistent with their credo of direct and defiant action, and their authoritarian rule following Red October was bound to provoke resistances which they were, of course, determined to counter and repress. But again, just as they were unprepared for the enormity of the crisis, so they were caught unaware by its Furies, which they were not alone to quicken."

Alan focuses considerable attention on the repression of the Kronstadt uprising of 1921. My understanding has been shaped, most of all, by two texts " Paul Avrich's *Kronstadt 1921* and Victor Serge's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*" and both provide greater complexity than Alan seems to allow.

Serge tells us that he and others like him concluded that the Kronstadt rebels' demands for genuine workers' democracy were admirable, although influenced by "certain anarchists whose heads were stuffed with infantile illusions," and that in 1921 only the Bolsheviks had a chance of holding the beleaguered Soviet republic together:

"If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short step to chaos, and through chaos to a peasant rising, the massacre of the Communists, and in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this one anti-proletarian."

At the same time, Serge and Avrich describe dishonest propaganda and violent repression, attributed especially to Zinoviev, which Lenin and Trotsky never repudiated.

The fact is, however, that the Kronstadt rising and repression took place within a much larger context of violence. The Bolshevik government's requisitioning of grain by using violence and coercion against the peasants, the breaking of strikes, undemocratic manipulations in trade unions and soviets, the banning of oppositional parties that were socialist and working class (demonizing them as petty-bourgeois and counter-revolutionary), the marginalization of disillusioned and dissident currents within the Communist Party " all of these things happened, were supported and justified by Trotsky and Lenin, and they undercut the socialist objective.

A Reponse on Trotsky

“Things that cry aloud to Heaven have been done by the provincial Chekas, by the All-Russian Cheka,” protested the heroic Left-Socialist Revolutionary Maria Spiridonova, unfortunately without exaggeration, well before 1921. “A blood-thirsty mockery of the souls and bodies of men, torture and treachery, and then — murder, murder without end, done without inquiry, on denunciation only, without waiting for any proof of guilt.” (Documentation is provided in several of my works, cited below.)

Isaac Deutscher, in a discussion with the editors of Liberation magazine, offered a way of understanding things that has influenced me since 1969:

“Then comes the great tragedy of the isolation of the Russian Revolution; of its succumbing to incredible, unimaginable destruction, poverty, hunger, and disease as a result of the wars of intervention, the civil wars, and of course the long and exhausting world war which was not of Bolshevik making. As a result of all this, terror was let loose in Russia. Men lost their balance. They lost, even the leaders, the clarity of their thinking and of their minds. They acted under overwhelming and inhuman pressures. I don’t undertake to judge them, to blame them or to justify them. I can only see the deep tragedy of this historic process, the result of which was the glorification of violence. But what was to have been a glassful of violence became buckets and buckets full, and then rivers of violence. That is the tragedy of the Russian Revolution.”

These are not positions that I have just embraced. They can be found in Lenin and the Revolutionary Party, in Marx, Lenin and the Revolutionary Experience, in my long introduction to the Pluto Press selection of Lenin’s writings, Revolution, Democracy, Socialism, and in some of the essays in Unfinished Leninism.

I think they are implicit in some of what I write in Leon Trotsky as well, though Alan is right that I am inclined in this book to offer “the reader some options to reach his or her own opinions.”

Making sense of Trotsky and his comrades may help us comprehend our own realities, which are in many ways (but not all ways) quite different from theirs. In seeking to learn from those who went before, one might argue, we should try to be as good as they were (learning from what they did right) in order to be better than they were (learning from their mistakes).

I am hoping that Alan’s challenge, as well as the book he challenged, will be of help to those wishing to learn from the good, the bad, the ugly and the magnificent associated with Trotsky, his comrades, and their times.

[Against the Current](#)