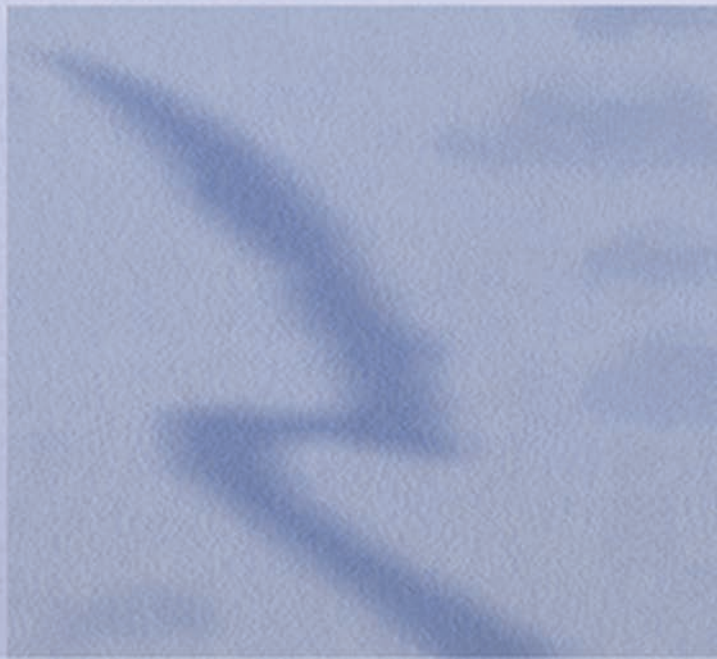


Trotsky

Ian D. Thatcher

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group



TROTSKY

Leon Trotsky has aroused strong passions, and historians love and hate him in equal measure. This new biography provides a full account of his political life, based upon a wealth of primary sources, including previously unpublished material.

Ian D. Thatcher paints a new picture of Trotsky's standing in Russian and world history. Key myths about Trotsky's heroic work as a revolutionary, especially in Russia's first revolution of 1905 and the Russian Civil War, are thrown into question. Although Trotsky had a limited understanding of crucial contemporary events such as Hitler's rise to power, he was an important thinker and politician, not least as a trenchant critic of Stalin's version of communism.

This study provides a clear and accessible introduction to Trotsky's life and thought for anyone interested in twentieth-century Russian and world history.

Ian D. Thatcher lectures in Modern Russian History at the University of Leicester. His previous publications include *Leon Trotsky and World War One* (2000) and *Regime and Society in Twentieth-Century Russia* (1999).

ROUTLEDGE HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHIES

SERIES EDITOR: ROBERT PEARCE

Routledge Historical Biographies provide engaging, readable and academically credible biographies written from an explicitly historical perspective. These concise and accessible accounts will bring important historical figures to life for students and general readers alike.

In the same series:

Bismarck by Edgar Feuchtwanger

Churchill by Robert Pearce

Gandhi by Crispin Bates

Gladstone by Michael Partridge

Henry VII by Sean Cunningham

Hitler by Martyn Housden

Jinnah by Sikander Hayat

Martin Luther King Jr. by Peter J. Ling

Lenin by Christopher Read

Martin Luther by Michael Mullet

Mary Queen of Scots by Reitha Warnicke

Mao by Michael Lynch

Mussolini by Peter Neville

Nehru by Ben Zachariah

Emmeline Pankhurst by Paula Bartley

Franklin D. Roosevelt by Stuart Kidd

Stalin by Geoffrey Roberts

TROTSKY

Ian D. Thatcher

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2003

by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 2003 Ian D. Thatcher

Typeset in Garamond and Scala Sans by Taylor & Francis Books Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Thatcher, Ian D.

Trotsky / Ian D. Thatcher

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Trotsky, Leon, 1879–1940. 2. Revolutionaries–Soviet

Union–Biography. 3. Statesmen–Soviet Union–Biography. I. Title.

DK254.T6 T5 2002

947.084'092–dc21

ISBN 0-415-23250-3 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-23251-1 (pbk)

CONTENTS

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| LIST OF PLATES | VII |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | VIII |
| CHRONOLOGY | IX |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1 The young revolutionary, 1879–1907 | 22 |
| 2 The fight for unity, 1907–14 | 48 |
| 3 War and revolution, 1914–17 | 70 |
| 4 Defending the revolution, 1917–21 | 93 |
| 5 The revolution in decline, 1921–4 | 117 |
| 6 Opposition and defeat, 1925–9 | 141 |
| 7 Against Stalinism and fascism, 1929–33 | 165 |
| 8 The final exile: the Fourth International and world events, 1933–40 | 188 |
| Conclusion | 211 |
| NOTES | 218 |
| FURTHER READING | 235 |
| INDEX | 236 |

PLATES

(between pages 116 and 117)

- 1 Trotsky, aged 9, in 1888
- 2 Trotsky photographed at the time of his first imprisonment, 1898
- 3 Trotsky reading his newly founded *Pravda* in Vienna in 1910
- 4 Trotsky visiting the Western Front during the Civil War
- 5 Trotsky's last holiday in the Soviet Union, 1927
- 6 Trotsky dictating to one of his secretaries in the 1930s
- 7 Trotsky's study after Ramon Mercader's attack, 20 August 1940
- 8 Trotsky on his deathbed

All illustrations © David King Collection

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this book was made possible by a semester of study leave granted by the University of Leicester and a six-month Research Fellowship awarded by the Leverhulme Trust. James D. White and Robert B. McKean read and commented upon a draft manuscript. Thanks are also due to Geoffrey Swain, Robert Pearce, and Vicky Peters and Sünje Redies of Routledge. Any errors are the responsibility of the author.

CHRONOLOGY

| | <i>Personal</i> | <i>Political</i> | <i>General</i> |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1879 | Birth of Trotsky | | |
| 1896 | | Trotsky joins his first revolutionary group | |
| 1898 | | Trotsky is arrested for revolutionary activities and exiled to Siberia | |
| 1899 | Trotsky marries his first wife, Alexandra Sokolovskaya, also a revolutionary | | |
| 1900 | Birth of Trotsky's daughter, Zinaida | | |
| 1902 | Birth of a second daughter, Nina | Escapes from exile and leaves Russia | |
| 1903 | Meets his second wife, Natalia Sedova | Attends the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party's (RSDLP) Second Congress and witnesses the split between Martov and Lenin | |
| 1905: January | | | Bloody Sunday marks the start of a year of Revolution in Russia |
| October | | | Tsar Nicholas II grants a Duma, or parliament |
| December | | Trotsky briefly becomes President of the St Petersburg Soviet | |
| 1906 | Birth of first son, Lev | Stands trial with other members of the Soviet | |
| 1907 | | Flees Siberian exile to live abroad | |

| | <i>Personal</i> | <i>Political</i> | <i>General</i> |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 1908 | Settles in Vienna; birth of second son, Sergei | | |
| 1912–14 | | Works as war correspondent during the Balkan wars | |
| 1914 | Moves to neutral Switzerland; moves to Paris | Works on the internationalist newspaper, <i>Our Word</i> | Outbreak of World War One |
| 1916 | Expelled from France to Spain | | |
| 1917: January | Arrives in New York | | |
| February | | | Nicholas II abdicates |
| May | Arrives in Russia | | |
| August | | Joins the Bolsheviks | |
| September | | Trotsky becomes chairman of the Petrograd Soviet | |
| October | | Organises the October Revolution; becomes the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs | |
| 1918: January | | Heads the peace negotiations with Germany at Brest- Litovsk; resigns as People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs | |
| March | | Appointed People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs | Russian Civil War begins |
| November | | | End of World War One |
| 1919 | | | Third International founded |
| 1920 | | | Russian Civil War ends; Russo– Polish War |

| | <i>Personal</i> | <i>Political</i> | <i>General</i> |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| 1921 | | | Kronstadt Uprising; New Economic Policy (NEP) adopted |
| 1922 | | | Stalin becomes General Secretary |
| 1923: October | | Sends letter to the Central Committee outlining his disagreements with current policy | |
| 1924 | | | Death of Lenin |
| 1925 | | Removed as head of Military and Naval Affairs | |
| 1926 | | Removed from the Politburo | |
| 1927: October | | Removed from the Central Committee | |
| November | | Expelled from the Bolshevik Party | |
| 1928: January | | Sent to Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan | |
| June | Death of daughter, Nina, from TB | | |
| July–September | | | Sixth Congress of the Third International |
| 1929 | | Deported to Turkey; launches the <i>Bulletin of the Opposition</i> | Five-Year Plans begin in USSR |
| 1930 | | Publishes autobiography, <i>My Life</i> ; foundation of an International Left Opposition in Paris | |
| 1931 | | Publishes <i>History of the Russian Revolution</i> | |
| 1933 | Death of daughter, Zinaida, from suicide; leaves Turkey for France | | Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany |

| | <i>Personal</i> | <i>Political</i> | <i>General</i> |
|------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1934 | | | USSR joins the League of Nations |
| 1935 | Moves to Norway | | Seventh Congress of the Third International |
| 1936 | Leaves Norway for Mexico | Completes <i>The Revolution Betrayed</i> | Moscow Show Trials; Spanish Civil War begins |
| 1937 | Death of son, Sergei, in Moscow trials | | |
| 1938 | Death of son, Lev, following operations | Foundation of the Fourth International | |
| 1939 | | | Spanish Civil War ends; Soviet–German Pact of Non-Aggression; start of World War Two |
| 1940 | Death, following assassination attempt | | |

INTRODUCTION

The political life of L.D. Trotsky (1879–1940) is a biographer's delight. It includes a rise from village obscurity to seizing power in the capital of Russia; a fall in the struggle to be Lenin's successor; and a lengthy period of exile in which current and past events were analysed in numerous publications. The last period was to be cut short by a vicious assassination, in which an ice-pick was twice inserted into the victim's skull. If this was not enough, it is a life filled with irony, heroism and tragedy, in which personal fortunes and misfortunes intersect with great historical moments, including World War One, the collapse of Tsarism, Hitler's rise to power, the Purges in the USSR and the failure of the Spanish Republic. Of all the leaders of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky's life is undoubtedly the most fascinating. No other Bolshevik shares his history of opposition, support for and then opposition to Bolshevism. No other Bolshevik attempted to found a new, Fourth International. No other Bolshevik wrote about his life as Trotsky did, even arranging the sale of his personal papers to Harvard University. Little wonder, then, that Trotsky has been represented in movies (by, amongst others, Richard Burton), has appeared in literature (in, for example, Anthony Burgess' *End of the World News*) and has even featured in popular song (most famously in 'No More Heroes' by The Stranglers).

Trotsky's actions, as commentator and participant, have also aroused great controversy. He is admired and vilified in equal measure. All too often, however, have the political passions of the biographer determined

the nature of the biography. Trotsky's life cries out for a more dispassionate study. This is one of the chief aims of the present political life.

Before we begin our account, however, it is important to review how Trotsky's life has been presented by previous studies. An examination of their strengths and weaknesses will also help to throw into relief how the current book hopes to shed fresh light on an already much examined life.

EARLY WRITINGS: SOVIET AND NON-SOVIET

Given the widely conflicting opinions of Trotsky and his fame as a Marxist, it is as well to remember that at one time his name was little known. Indeed, before the October Revolution Trotsky, like other Bolsheviks, was familiar only to a relatively small circle of revolutionaries and radicals. One of the many tasks of the newly proclaimed Bolshevik regime was to explain who its members were, and the history of their relations in the pre-revolutionary era. There were several means by which the lives of the People's Commissars were publicised.

To begin with, the Soviet government utilised the resources of the state. Trotsky became more widely known through the use of posters, film and other propaganda, as well as numerous newspaper articles lauding his achievements. Second, biographies of key figures in the Cabinet were commissioned. These were often written in a simple style, with photographs, for easy consumption by a wide audience, presumably to include party members, schoolchildren and members of the public. B. Volnyi, for example, researched brief biographies of twelve of the leading Bolsheviks, none longer than five or six pages. Although each mini-biography was listed alphabetically, Trotsky emerges as the leading figure, most notably for his role in organising the October Revolution and for building the Red Army. Third, the leaders' writings were published in impressive-looking selected and collected works. These had a scholarly appearance, with introductions and numerous footnotes. Fourth, members of the government would write character sketches of one another.

These official publications were largely complimentary to Trotsky. In the footnotes to the first edition of Lenin's collected works, for example, he is celebrated as the author of the theory of permanent revolution. On the first anniversary of the October Revolution, in the official daily

newspaper *Truth*, none other than Joseph Stalin applauded Trotsky for organising the seizure of power. However, Trotsky was not painted in one colour. Zinoviev's collected works, for example, mentioned the disputes between Trotsky and Lenin of World War One, even if some of the harsher comments of the time were cut. Trotsky's colleagues were not reticent in mentioning the negative as well as the positive aspects of his character. In a memoir published in 1919, for example, A. Lunacharsky praised Trotsky for his talents as an orator and as a man of revolutionary action, but also pointed out his arrogance and disregard for the feelings of others, qualities that often left him friendless and without allies in the party. Lunacharsky also contrasted Lenin and Trotsky as thinkers. If Lenin was flexible and creative, Trotsky was orthodox and mechanical.

The images of Trotsky typical of early Soviet publications were supplemented and, in some cases, challenged by works issued abroad, written variously by visitors to Soviet Russia, by those who had once known Trotsky and were now keen to produce their own portraits, and by analysts interested in Russian affairs. Some of these reached wide audiences, for publishers were eager to print first-hand accounts of the Bolshevik experiment. In the reminiscences of the sculptress Claire Sheridan, for example, Trotsky is remembered as a punctual, hardworking, excessively polite and charming subject. Sheridan, whose artistic talents were stretched by this particular commission, was pleased that her bust of Trotsky captured a man so 'adored'. For Sheridan,

[Trotsky] has come into his own and has unconsciously developed a new individuality. He has the manner and ease of a man born to a great position; he has become a statesman, a ruler, a leader. But if Trotsky were not Trotsky, and the world had never heard of him, one would still appreciate his very brilliant mind. The reason I have found him so much more difficult to do than I expected, is on account of his triple personality. He is the cultured, well-read man, he is the vituperative fiery politician, and he can be the mischievous laughing school-boy with the dimple in his cheek. All these three I have seen in turn, and have had to converge them into a clay interpretation.¹

Other early accounts of Trotsky published in the West, particularly those in Russian, remained obscure. This is to be regretted as they often

contain valuable insights and comments. Books on Trotsky by G. Ziv and M. Smolensky, for example, were published in New York and Berlin in 1921. Ziv and Smolensky approach their topic with different intentions. Ziv was writing a memoir, based upon an acquaintance with Trotsky that began in the revolutionary circles of southern Russia in 1896. Smolensky was contributing to a publisher's series of history of political thought. It is uncertain whether he ever knew Trotsky personally. Such differences in genre notwithstanding, these books are interesting when juxtaposed, for they contain conflicting views of Trotsky.

Ziv's book must be approached with some caution. This is partly because, as the introduction admits, there were long periods in which the author and Trotsky did not meet. Furthermore, the memoir is particularly unsympathetic to the Bolshevik Revolution and to what is considered to be Trotsky's excessive use of violence in its defence. Nevertheless, Ziv's memoirs are of tremendous importance because they are the only first-hand account of Trotsky's early political activities, highlighting Trotsky's strengths and weaknesses as a politician. Moreover, the memoir was produced before the power struggle that followed Lenin's death; it is not a work of hindsight. Trotsky's chief attributes, as seen by Ziv, were a desire and talent for action combined with complete devotion to the revolutionary cause. It was these characteristics that made Trotsky of such value to the socialist movement, whether in running the small Southern Workers' Russian Union of the late 1890s, or in organising various newspapers and taking on leading roles in the great events of 1905 and 1917. In these senses, it is argued that Trotsky was always a Bolshevik 'by nature'. However, according to Ziv, Trotsky rose to the top with only a surface understanding of events. A lack of discipline required for consistent and serious study, evident even in his schoolwork, rendered Trotsky incapable of profound political analysis. His theoretical work, from his first attempts to write a treatise on the Masons and a Marxist novel to later tracts on the Duma and the outbreak of World War One, were, for Ziv, largely vacuous, full of bombastic phrases but devoid of real content. Moreover, Trotsky's weaknesses as a thinker were surpassed only by his failings as a human being. Trotsky's arrogance, his need to be acknowledged as superior, placed demands on his friends that few could bear. Most became enemies. As the practitioner of Bolshevism *par excellence*, Trotsky had won his place

in history, but Ziv does not perceive any constructive political future for his subject.

Smolensky's conclusions differ sharply from those of Ziv and Lunacharsky. According to Smolensky, not only was Trotsky equal to Lenin as a theoretician, but Trotsky's Marxism was much more inventive than Lenin's orthodox approach. If Lenin's works are full of dry citations, Trotsky leaves classic texts behind, displaying instead a penchant for the analysis of living social forces. For Smolensky, Trotsky's method gave him the acumen, as early as 1905–6, to predict the future outcome of the Russian Revolution with great accuracy. Thus, for example, the peasantry's inability to play an independent political role, the leadership position that the proletariat would occupy, and the difficulties and dangers of a socialist revolution in a backward country, were all discussed intelligently by Trotsky well in advance of 1917. Smolensky also devotes much attention to Trotsky's writings after the revolution, most notably *Terrorism and Communism*, Trotsky's riposte to the critique of Karl Kautsky, the famous German socialist leader, of the anti-democratic aspects of Bolshevism. Smolensky interprets this debate as a clash of competing trends in Marxism, one evolutionary and democratic (Kautsky), the other revolutionary and unapologetically undemocratic (Trotsky). That the task of defending Bolshevism from its major socialist opponent fell to Trotsky was testimony, for Smolensky, of Trotsky's stature as a thinker. How long, asks Smolensky, could Lenin have survived in power without Trotsky? For Trotsky was not only the major source of ideological support, but also the leading man of action. In rushing from front to front, organising and inspiring, it was Trotsky who was responsible for the Red victory in the Civil War. In only one respect does Smolensky detract from the praise heaped upon Trotsky. *Pace* Lunacharsky, whose memoirs he mentions specifically, Smolensky does not consider Trotsky the greatest orator of the day.

THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF STALINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

By 1921, then, one could claim that the main competing interpretations of Trotsky's life were already in place – this some two decades before his death. However, positive voices in the USSR were soon to be censored as a consequence of Trotsky's fate in the power struggles of the

1920s. In these battles historical topics played no small role. A key moment in the introduction of questions of history in the struggle for power was a discussion that arose in 1924. The starting-point was the publication of volume three of Trotsky's collected works. This volume gathered Trotsky's writings of 1917, to which he added a new introduction, the essay 'Lessons of October' (1924).

For Trotsky, the main lesson that revolutionaries should take from a study of 1917 was that a revolutionary party headed by a determined leadership was the vital precondition for the success of a socialist attempt on power. If the leadership erred, by choosing the wrong moment to act or by adopting reformist tactics when revolution was the order of the day, for example, all would be lost. This had been revealed most recently, for Trotsky, when poor leadership had let the opportunity for revolution slip by in Bulgaria, Hungary and, most importantly, Germany. Even in Russia in 1917 it was not guaranteed that Bolshevism would find the right course, for, as Trotsky points out in some detail, there was tremendous resistance among prominent Bolsheviks to the idea of a Bolshevik-led seizure of power. Most notably, Kamenev and Zinoviev had acted as Mensheviks, arguing that Russia was ready for a democratic revolution only, and that the Bolsheviks should remain a party of revolutionary opposition. It took pressure from Lenin to ensure that a defeatist policy was not thrust upon the party. It is in this sense that Trotsky argues that the October Revolution would not have happened without Lenin. However, according to Trotsky even Lenin, for the most part in hiding, made mistakes. Chief among these were preferring Moscow over Petrograd as the starting place for the assumption of power, and thinking that a seizure of power would be obstructed if it was linked to the convocation of the Second Congress of Soviets. Although Trotsky does not mention himself by name, it is made clear that it was the Military-Revolutionary Committee, which Trotsky chaired, that was responsible for the smooth transfer of power to the Bolsheviks.

Trotsky claimed that he was revisiting the experience of 1917 to help foreign comrades carry out their own Octobers, and not to draw any current political advantage for himself. It is, however, hard to avoid precisely this conclusion. After all, Trotsky states that the ultimate test of a leadership is how it acts in a revolutionary situation. From Trotsky's account of 1917 only he emerges with honour. If in 1924 one accepted

the arguments of 'Lessons of October', then only one man could replace the now dead Lenin, namely Leon Trotsky. It is perfectly understandable, then, that having been accused of the sins of Menshevism in 1917, Trotsky's colleagues sought to refute his 'Lessons of October'. This they did in a series of speeches and articles, which were then gathered together and published in Russian and in translations in book form.²

Leading Bolsheviks (including Kamenev, Stalin, Zinoviev and Bukharin) and key representatives from the Communist International (the Comintern) and the Communist Youth League (the Komsomol) argued that Trotsky's essay was not a genuine history of the October Revolution. If one consulted the key documents of the time and a growing supply of memoir literature, for example, Trotsky's detractors claimed that one would discover how far his memory had painted a distorted picture. Most notably, Trotsky had minimised the roles played by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party and had exaggerated his own contribution. It was, for example, wrong to claim that in 1917 there was a long and sustained battle between a Lenin seeking to rearm the party with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and a right-Menshevik faction within Bolshevik ranks. In actual fact Lenin's analysis of the events of 1917 grew out of a long-held theory of the Russian Revolution. Once Lenin had convinced colleagues of the correctness of his developing strategy, the party acted in a unified way to guarantee victory. In this process neither Lenin nor the party was in any way influenced by Trotsky or Trotskyism.

Indeed, the anti-Trotsky case continues, the whole history of Leninism and Bolshevism before and after 1917 was one of opposition to Trotskyism. Unfortunately, Trotsky had failed to realise that he was only effective in 1917 because he acted under the guidance of the Bolshevik Party. Indeed, Trotsky had never fully understood the implications of joining the Bolshevik Party. He had not made a full commitment to becoming a Bolshevik. If he had, then he would have produced a very different history. Trotsky would, for example, have admitted his past and recent theoretical, as well as organisational, errors. Only in this way would youth understand the proper relationship between Leninism and Trotskyism, and how to avoid the sins of the latter. 'Lessons of October' was an attempt by Trotsky to replace Leninism with Trotskyism. This, however, the Bolshevik Party would not allow him to achieve. The leadership understood the dangers of Trotskyism, revealed

in Trotsky's underestimation of the importance of the peasantry, and in his mistaken policies during the peace negotiations with Germany, in the debate over the trade unions and on the issue of currency reform.

Although the prospect of repressive measures against Trotsky was rejected, a call was made for a propaganda war against Trotskyism. It was pointed out, however, that such a campaign should not be directed at Trotsky personally. The party recognised his skills, but only by being protected from the pitfalls in his own theories could comrade Trotsky contribute to the cause of Leninism.

In 1924, then, two conflicting versions of Trotsky's relationship to Bolshevism were established within the Russian Communist Party. With Trotsky in the minority, support was both needed and rare. Some of his friends did come to his aid. In 1926 the leading American communist and frequent visitor to Moscow Max Eastman, for example, published a portrait of the young Trotsky. This placed Lenin above Trotsky, the latter lacking the former's maturity and depth of thought. When Trotsky opposed Lenin at the Second Congress of 1903, Eastman claims, it was largely out of innocence and hurt feelings. Lenin, however, was able to see beyond this and, despite a parting that was to last for many years, continued to appreciate Trotsky's abilities, not least a bravery and devotion to socialism. It was these qualities that Lenin was to call upon in 1917 when he welcomed Trotsky back into the fold. None other than Lenin's widow, Krupskaya, confirmed Lenin's longstanding esteem for Trotsky in a (reproduced) note sent to Trotsky within a week of Lenin's death. Lenin, Eastman concluded, always believed in Trotsky.

Although it was a passionate and heartfelt account, Eastman's book only appeared abroad. It made little impact on developments in Russia. In 1927 an official encyclopedia of the revolution was published. The essay on Trotsky, by V. Nevsky, is pervaded by references to Trotsky's anti-party activities, for which he paid the ultimate price, expulsion from the party. However, Nevsky does not present a one-sided tale of continuous hostility between Trotsky and Bolshevism. He points out that there were attempts at reconciliation (in 1907 and 1909, for example) and concedes that in 1917 Trotsky played a leading role in preparing the October Revolution. Such concessions became increasingly rare as Trotsky was sent into internal exile and then expelled from the USSR. In 1931 Stalin sent a letter to the editorial board of the journal *Proletarian Revolution* calling for the lid to be closed on certain historical

questions. Subsequently the infamous textbook on party history, the *Short Course* (1939), confined Trotsky and Trotskyism to the dustbin of history as an anti-party, petty-bourgeois tendency. This was to set the agenda for Soviet writings on Trotsky for several decades to come.

TROTSKY ON TROTSKY

As Stalin was tightening his grip on the writing of history in the USSR, Trotsky responded, quite naturally, by taking up his pen. He wrote about his own life, producing one of the most important sources for future students of Trotsky. The 'attempt at an autobiography' (the subtitle of *My Life*, 1929) was made in very special circumstances, a context that left a deep mark on the work itself. Trotsky was aware of this and made no attempt to hide this fact from his readers. Produced in exile, the memoir, he states candidly, would not have existed had he not fallen from power. Given recent events, his autobiography could be nothing other than polemical. It was an opportunity to defend himself and attack others, along lines set by the debates and accusations of the internal party wrangles of the 1920s.

Above all, Trotsky wanted to prove that the best of all Leninists was Trotsky himself. This image is constructed in several ways. The disagreements of the pre-revolutionary years are minimised. Those of the period 1914–17, for example, are largely omitted. Second, the disputes with Lenin that are admitted (principally over the nature of a forthcoming Russian revolution and whether a party of the Leninist type was needed) are turned to Trotsky's advantage. The process of arriving at Leninism through a period of inner resistance made of Trotsky, we are told, a better Leninist. The ultimate proof of this is the fact that in 1917 only Lenin and Trotsky, working independently of one another, concluded that the bourgeois-democratic Provisional Government had to be overthrown and all power given to the Soviets. Third, N. Krupskaya and M. Gorky, amongst others, are cited to show that in the post-revolutionary years Lenin retained only the highest regard for Trotsky. Old and current battles were forgotten to such an extent that Lenin wanted Trotsky to succeed him as head of the Soviet state. This is clear, claims Trotsky, from a reading of Lenin's Testament, as well as from Lenin's desire for an alliance with Trotsky to remove Stalin. Fourth, Lenin and Trotsky were joined not only as creative thinkers in

the Marxist tradition, but as individuals. In their work habits, for instance, both insisted upon order and thoroughness. Neither liked petty intrigue or small talk. All issues were viewed from the standpoint of revolutionary morality, and comradely relations were maintained despite occasional differences of opinion. Little wonder, then, that Lenin is presented as turning first of all to Trotsky as a sounding-board for ideas, exchanging secret notes during government meetings. Little surprise, then, that all the best elements in the Bolshevik Party gather around Trotsky, wanting to serve in the ministries he headed.

The main target of attack was, of course, Joseph Stalin. Stalin is belittled in many ways, as a person and as a revolutionary. In the period February to April 1917, for example, Trotsky claims that Stalin acted as the worst sort of Menshevik, proclaiming partnership between Soviet and Provisional Government. This was the nonsense that Lenin had to overcome, most notably in the April Theses, before the October Revolution could be staged, an event for which Stalin did nothing. This record, continues Trotsky, was sustained post-1917. Unable to undertake constructive work, Stalin, revealing his true self, used his idle hands to cause mischief in military, party and nationality affairs. Little wonder then that all the worst, most corrupt elements in the party sought friendship with Stalin. When Lenin woke up to this state of affairs he broke off personal relations with Stalin and sought the bloc with Trotsky.

The Lenin-Trotsky alliance, however, was not able to achieve anything of great value. Lenin was to die before it was really cemented. Nevertheless, given the stark contrast between the 'good' Trotsky and the 'bad' Stalin, it is natural to wonder why Stalin was able to win the battle of succession. This question also troubled Trotsky, who offered several reasons for Stalin's success. To begin with, Lenin came to learn of Stalin's devious character and penchant for intrigue relatively late. Before 1917, Trotsky claims, Lenin barely knew Stalin. Stalin was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1922 against Lenin's will, even though the post was considered a minor one. Once in post, however, Stalin used powers of appointment to good advantage, removing Trotsky's followers and promoting his own. With Lenin dead, Trotsky doubted whether he could muster the forces to overcome Stalin's stranglehold on the party. The Politburo, for example, bar Trotsky, was committed to the anti-Trotsky campaign. Trotsky was

increasingly denied access to information; he was even misinformed about the date of Lenin's funeral so as to keep him from returning to Moscow. Second, Trotsky lacked the inner resources for a naked battle for power. This was partly because the thought of openly trying to take on the master's mantle was abhorrent to him, and partly because of a mysterious and recurring illness that struck at key moments. The decisive factor identified by Trotsky as dooming him to defeat, however, was a reaction within the revolution itself. If Trotsky had risen to the top on the revolution's tidal wave, its ebbing, typified above all by the failure of revolution in Germany in 1923, signalled his downfall.

There are many problematic aspects of Trotsky's *My Life*. It draws upon sources in a highly selective manner, taking care to refer only to those that confirm the author's view of events. Lunacharsky, for example, is quoted when he praised Trotsky but his critique of Trotsky's arrogance and vanity is ignored. At no point does Trotsky discuss his use of sources and how his 'life' differs from the existing literature, most notably the portrait painted by Ziv. Trotsky is very careful to show his concern for historical truth, in particular the need to correct the falsifications of the past typical of the anti-Trotsky campaign. At several points he refers to documents kept secret in the USSR because of praise for Trotsky contained in them. However, Trotsky does not confront the possibility that he also used the past for political purposes. Was the essay 'Lessons of October' (1924), for example, an attempt by Trotsky to use history to promote his own candidacy for leader? After all, much of the muckraking into the past subsequently condemned by Trotsky was written as a response to 'Lessons of October'. But Trotsky is not keen to consider his own responsibility for generating this aspect of the power struggle.

In some instances the interpretations seem contradictory or not very convincing. If Trotsky lost to Stalin because the revolution itself went into decline, for example, why does Trotsky claim that he could have defeated Stalin if he had acted more boldly in 1923? Even later, in 1926–7, we are told that the revolutionary spirit was still sufficiently strong for the majority of workers in Moscow and Leningrad to support the Left Opposition. It seems as though revolutionary decline is invoked to explain defeat and revolutionary spirit is recalled to show that Trotsky was the real popular hero of the revolution, that his ideas had a resonance in society, that ultimately victory would be on his side. But

the exact correlation of forces between 'decline' and 'spirit' at specific points in time is never fully explained and, for this reader, the primacy of 'social causation' in explaining Trotsky's defeat is thrown into doubt. The portrait of Stalin is somewhat contradictory. That Stalin backed Trotsky against Lenin over how best to defend Petrograd in the Russian Civil War shows that Stalin was not always the Lenin-automaton Trotsky claims him to have been. Finally, it is not clear why Trotsky was left with no alternative but to continue with his travels after he had been told by Stalin that he would miss Lenin's funeral by one day. Surely a better political instinct would have told him to return to Moscow post-haste?

Such issues notwithstanding, one cannot but be impressed by *My Life*. There are wonderful descriptions of Trotsky's transition from child to adult, most notably how he came to associate the countryside with backwardness and brutality, and the town with culture and good manners. One cannot imagine Stalin writing with similar ease about his formative experiences, including his first encounters with adult sexuality and sexual liaisons. There are also fascinating insights into how business was conducted in the first sessions of the Soviet government, the Sovnarkom, of how Lenin acted as chairman and of the disputes that raged in the Cabinet over military strategy in the Civil War. The picture of power bases being constructed through appointment and patronage, with the Secretariat as the key political office, offered a powerful model for interpreting the Soviet political system. As a memoir, *My Life* has exerted a tremendous influence on subsequent historians of this period. Isaac Deutscher, for example, finds it as honest an account as can be expected, and often relies upon it for a factual version of events. Indeed, the leitmotif of Deutscher's trilogy – that of Trotsky as prophet – is taken straight out of *My Life*, in which Trotsky's talent as a Marxist is illustrated through the power of his predictions. *My Life* has been accepted as the main source for biographers, some of whom have accomplished little more than rewriting it on a new canvas. To this extent Trotsky more than achieved the aims he set for himself.

TROTSKYISTS AND TROTSKY

Following Trotsky's death it fell first of all to his political allies to defend his life. Obituaries produced by Trotskyists, for example that by

James T. Farrell, lauded Trotsky's intellectual and personal qualities. Trotsky, Farrell tells us, was not only capable of profound and prophetic political analyses, but would also devote 'as much care and thought to a letter to an unknown worker as he would to an article directed against a famous figure. ... In his personal relations he was simple and charming – a man of singular grace.'³ Such brief obituary notices were soon followed by more substantial memoirs. Trotsky's widow, Natalia Sedova, wrote an early example of this genre. She was aided by Victor Serge, a left-revolutionary of long standing. Together they elaborated the picture of Trotsky presented in the Trotskyist obituaries, but on a much larger scale. From his school days to his death, Sedova and Serge see Trotsky as promoting justice and democracy from a socialist perspective. Above all, they stress Trotsky's humanistic aspirations. For example, Trotsky resorted to violence only when absolutely necessary. He sought power not for himself, but so that the workers could be liberated. Indeed, Trotsky was a medium rather than an independent political actor; his political presence derived from his ability to express the mood and demands of the masses. Through tireless and modest efforts, in the spirit of open and honest exchanges with colleagues, Trotsky embodied all that was best in the Russian socialist movement. His banishment, Serge and Sedova claim, 'sealed the total collapse of morale inside the Bolshevik Party'.⁴

Apart from obituary notices and memoirs, the Trotskyist movement has also contributed in other ways to protecting Trotsky's reputation. Pathfinder Press is probably the most famous of the Trotskyist imprints that have published a broad selection of Trotsky's oeuvre, including the multi-volume *Writings*, covering the period from 1929 onwards. Numerous primers on Trotsky's main ideas and a host of biographies have also been written. Some of these are of little value, being mostly works of hagiography. The most recent biographical study, in four volumes (1989–93), of this school of thought belongs to the late Tony Cliff, a longstanding British Trotskyist. His efforts contain the flaws typical of this genre. Most annoying is Cliff's tendency to reproduce long passages from Trotsky, either as evidence for a particular view of Trotsky's actions or as uncritical acceptance of Trotsky's analysis of events. Furthermore, Cliff avoids a serious discussion of Trotsky's works, preferring simple flattery. Without offering any elaboration or justification, for example, Cliff describes Trotsky's five-volume *How the*

Revolution Armed as 'a rich combination of broad historical sweep, originality, innovation and attention to the details of army life'.⁵ The final volume of Cliff's study concludes with a message for the party faithful, rather than a considered evaluation:

Present and future generations of Marxists will carry the revolutionary flame left to us by Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky. ... The last six decades belonged to Stalin. The coming decades will belong to Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky. We owe a massive debt to Trotsky. Without his opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy, without his internationalism, the tradition of 'socialism from below', the identification of socialism with the self-activity of the working class, would not have survived.⁶

Cliff's biography is unlikely to have a wide public audience or to make much of an impact in academia. This cannot be said of the most influential of the Trotsky biographers within the Trotskyist tradition, Isaac Deutscher. His trilogy on Trotsky (1954–63) was not only published by the highly reputable Oxford University Press, it was also the first serious account of Trotsky the thinker and Trotsky the man. Having gone through many editions, Deutscher's work has remained the basic text on Trotsky's life for several generations of undergraduates and general readers. When the present author was studying for his first degree, Deutscher was recommended as summer reading, not only as a text of great historical sweep, but also because it would be fun. It would read, I was told, as a boy's own adventure story. This is worth recalling as it gives an indication of the attractions, as well as the weaknesses, of Deutscher's tomes.

At a general level, Deutscher sets out to prove that Trotsky's achievements should not be linked to his political fortunes. Indeed, Trotsky's great strengths, chiefly intellectual honesty and clear and cogent political prognoses, were unaffected by the outcomes of political struggles. Throughout his life Trotsky remained what he was, simply, in Deutscher's words, 'one of the most outstanding revolutionary leaders of all times, outstanding as fighter, thinker, and martyr'.⁷ Deutscher's work abounds with instances in which Trotsky saw further and deeper than those around him. A long list includes: predicting the course of the