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Trotsky on Stalin

BY BERTRAM D. WOLFE

IN ALL literature there is no more dramatic relation between author and subject than in this biography of Joseph Stalin by Leon Trotsky.¹ It is like Robespierre doing a life of Fouché, Kurbsky of Ivan the Terrible, Muenzer of Martin Luther, Sathanas of the Archangel Michael . . . with the world still beset with controversy as to which was Prince of Heaven and which Lord of the Powers of Darkness.

The hero, or anti-hero, of this biography has already after his own fashion done a life of his biographer: in the purge trials; in the burning of a succession of official party histories and the ultimate dictating of his own; in the retroactive editing of his past and Trotsky's on a scale possible only to the master of a state which possesses a monopoly alike of the produc-

tion and distribution of goods and of the production and distribution of ideas. In Stalin's history of the Party Trotsky is drawn as "Judas Iscariot" betraying Lenin, opposing the Revolution of 1917 with which he somehow got identified, attempting to surrender the new Soviet state to Germany early in 1918, directing the bullet which struck Lenin down later in the same year, trying his hardest to lose the Civil War, and thereafter engaging in "the betrayal of state secrets and the supply of information of an espionage character to foreign espionage services, the vile assassination of Kirov, acts of wrecking, diversion and explosions, the dastardly murder of Menzhinsky, Kuibyshev and Gorky — all these and similar villainies over a period of twenty years."

Trotsky's *Stalin* is only fully understandable when we bear in mind that it is Trotsky's rejoinder, his last word in defense of his own career and in

¹ STALIN: *An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, by Leon Trotsky. Edited and translated from the Russian by Charles Malamuth. \$5. Harper.

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indictment of his powerful antagonist. A good part of it is chapter and verse refutation of Stalin's official and originally anonymous *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. Many arid pages are devoted to a detailed re-examination of the actual record, a resurrection of suppressed and flouted documents, an interminable going over the lists of committees in charge of this and that to show that they did not always consist of Lenin and Stalin alone, that Stalin's name was as a rule not even in second place, that often it did not figure in the list at all.

"History is becoming clay in the hands of the potter," exclaims Trotsky. But how different would his tone have been, how much more scornful and devastating his invective, had he known that he was quarreling not with the will-less potter's wheel, but with the potter himself. If he had lived until January 20, 1946, he would have learned from the columns of *Pravda* that Stalin is himself the author of this strange work of historical falsification, endless self-quotation and self-glorification, and that the anonymous *History* first published in 1938 will soon appear as Volume XV of Joseph Stalin's sixteen-volume *Collected Works!*

Read thus together, both Stalin's *History* and Trotsky's biography of Stalin take on enormously more meaning, tension and intellectual excitement. Many an obscure passage, so trivial-seeming that one wondered why Stalin even put it into a book, suddenly reveals itself as a cover for

something far from trivial. Those episodes and passages in which Stalin's undocumented assertions seem wildest and most nonsensical turn out to be the places in Trotsky's book where the documents speak most eloquently. Even as these two men were polar opposites bound to each other by antagonistic energies in a single, highly charged magnetic field, so their two books are inseparably bound together as polar complements of each other.

II

As befits a volume thus conceived in controversy, the manuscript of Trotsky's *Stalin* has had a stormy history. Some of the source material was lugged by its author across Siberia to exile in remote Alma Ata, then to Turkey, Norway, France, Mexico, as he was driven from land to land. The book was written in a semi-fortress home in peaceful-seeming Coyoacan, behind heavily barred doors, guarded by Mexican police and pistol-carrying disciples, beneath specially constructed turrets on which machine guns were mounted. Work on the later chapters was pressed unremittingly in a conscious race with death, after the home had been broken into by Mexican Communists disguised as police, the bed where Trotsky and his wife had been sleeping a moment before riddled with machine gun bullets, his grandson Seva wounded and his secretary-guard, Sheldon Harte, carried off and murdered. "Stalin

will strike again," said the author, knowing his subject and knowing how anxious the latter was to prevent his giving his testimony to the world.

A few months later, the long arm of the GPU reached again into his home, by guile this time, and plunged a short-handled alpine pick into his pulsing brain. "On August 20, 1940," writes translator-editor Charles Malamuth, "Trotsky was struck a mortal blow on the back of his head with a pickaxe and his brain wrenched out while he was reading a manuscript. . . . That is why this and other portions of this book remain unfinished."

Seven chapters (out of twelve), and all three appendices, had been completed, translated, and the translation checked by Leon Trotsky. Thereafter the translator, whom Death had transformed into editor, constructed the remaining five chapters out of notes, hints, work sheets, and unfinished fragments. Even if the author had lived to finish it, the work would have suffered from a certain imbalance since Trotsky was more interested in the formative period that made Stalin's character, and in the devices by which he rose to power, than in the uses he made of his power once it was complete and all opponents eliminated. But the pathetic ending of the manuscript in the middle of a sentence adds to the imbalance.

The later chapters, reconstructed like a broken mosaic by Charles Malamuth, are a marvel of patient care and insight. Yet the scope and the sparkle

and polish that Trotsky was wont to give to his finished work are lacking. Here and there the connective passages supplied by the editor — always scrupulously marked off by square brackets — reveal Malamuth's prejudice in favor of democracy rather than Trotsky's prejudice against it. To Trotsky's wife and political heirs a few of these interpolations seemed so alien to the spirit of the original that they were preparing to bring suit to enjoin Harper from publishing, when suddenly the publishing house itself decided that it was not "timely" to let the American people know all they could possibly learn about the man who had just become our ally. So, while Ambassador Davies and others of his school were painting Joseph Stalin as a gentle, pipe-puffing soul at whose feet dogs loved to lie and on whose knees children loved to coo, this well documented, revealing picture was withheld from us for four long years. Whatever its deficiencies, it would have been worth a thousand Davies and Durantys in those war years. This incident, and many like it, should make us reconsider the system of "voluntary censorship" with its amateur judgments by countless censors who are without responsibility to the citizenry and beyond the reach of public protest.

Nor does that end the vicissitudes of the ill-fated work. On page 399 Trotsky wrote:

The part of the Oppositionist writings that I managed to bring out with me at the time of my expulsion to Turkey is now

in the Harvard Library and *at the disposal of all those who may be interested in studying the record of that remarkable struggle by going to the original sources.* [Italics are mine.]

Alas, poor dead man, unable to defend his will! At this writing the Harvard Library has clapped a twenty-five year seal upon these documents — strange fate for the papers of one who once electrified the world by broadcasting the secret treaties of his country and its allies in the midst of war. It is to be hoped that Harvard will soon follow the example of Harper's in giving the American people the right of access to such important material concerning an ally with whom we must cooperate in peace as in war.

III

Leon Trotsky was a born writer (his earliest underground name was *Pero* — the Russian word for "pen"), with a strong sense of literary form and a fastidious pride in every line he wrote. Doubtless he would have worked hard to make this book, so important to him, more nearly equal to his best. But, in any case, the finished portions betray that it would have sagged far below his masterpieces, *The Year 1905* and *The History of the Russian Revolution*. The completed chapters are inferior, too, to the finished portions of a life of Lenin, likewise interrupted by death. This *Stalin* is not done — to put it mildly — *con amore*, but as a disagreeable duty by one with an

obvious distaste for the machinations and falsifications which he feels obliged to follow with such painful and painstaking detail. The very grossness of Stalin's invective has impelled Trotsky, himself an undoubted master of powerful invective, to assume an unwonted dry and colorless restraint. Moreover, he is haunted by the fear that the unthinking and unconcerned will attribute his book to hatred rather than a desire to restore the erased outlines of historical truth.

At times grudgingly, at times freely, Trotsky concedes to Stalin whatever strong points he can: "indomitable will (a will that always immeasurably surpassed his intellectual powers); firmness of character and action; grit; stubbornness; and to a certain extent even his slyness . . . ruthlessness and conniving, attributes indispensable in the struggle" with an enemy class; "personal courage; cold persistence and practical common sense."

But the mainspring of Stalin's personality Trotsky finds to be "love of power, ambition, envy — active, never-slumbering envy of all who were more gifted, more powerful, of higher rank than he."

Trotsky proves from incontestable documents that up to 1917 Stalin was not regarded as a leader, hardly even on a provincial scale, but as a second-string lieutenant, "a small time propagandist and organizer"; that in the fateful year 1917 when all the other leaders "went around with cracked voices" from addressing mass-

meetings Stalin proved lacking in the fire and eloquence to stir the people; that "he emerged from the Civil War as unknown and alien to the masses as he had from the October Revolution." Stalin's secret and spectacular rise to power, Trotsky maintains, "began only after it had become possible to harness the masses with the aid of the machine." Through it all Stalin remained "what he is to this day, a mediocrity, though not a nonentity," with an inherent political "caution" in making up his mind, an utter "lack of initiative, daring and originality . . . never anticipating anything, never running ahead of any one, preferring to measure ten times before cutting the cloth. Inside this revolutionist always lurked a conservative bureaucrat."

In this psychological analysis there are some major difficulties which Trotsky never succeeds in surmounting. How did this incurable "mediocrity" rise to the position of most powerful single individual on the face of the earth? This is a problem comparable to the one so many analysts of Hitler have left unsolved: after they have exhibited the Dictator of Berchtesgaden as ignorant, psychopathic, a mediocre misfit in private life, they are at a loss to explain what forces elevated such a man to leadership of a great and cultured nation. Trotsky rightly shifts his ground from the psychological to the sociological, but his sociological schemata hobble his analysis rather than guide it. As Trotsky sees it, "Thermidorean reac-

tion" was inevitable in Russia unless its revolution spread to the West. Stalin was "the best possible expression of this bureaucratic conservative reaction" and his rise to power inevitable, too. ("Lenin's recovery could not, of course, have prevented the superseding of the Revolution by the bureaucratic reaction. Krupskaya — Lenin's wife — had sound reasons for observing in 1926: 'If Volodya were alive he would be in prison now.'")

But how can one lead a struggle against reaction under the slogan that reaction is inevitable? How unleash the resources of moral condemnation upon a phenomenon as natural and unavoidable as an earthquake? Clearly it is one of the secrets of Trotsky's defeat in the struggle with his antagonist, as it is one of the deficiencies of the present book that its author's mind was paralyzed by this self-disarming dogma of "inevitability."

Akin to it is Trotsky's underestimation of the capacities of the man with whom he had to deal. Trotsky's Jewish heritage as a descendant of "the People of the Book"; his Marxist heritage as a disciple of the greatest sociological thinker of modern times; his literary heritage as a lover of the Russian tongue and master of the written word; his revolutionary heritage as the pre-eminent tribune of the people, able by flaming eloquence to stir the masses, hearten them to struggle, lift them outside their petty personal concerns to the level of action on the arena of history — all these combined to make Trotsky set the highest pos-

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sible value upon ideas, originality and theoretical clarity in their formulation, exactness in their expression, eloquence in writing and in speech, contagious personal magnetism and attractive force. In these respects Stalin always was and remains to this day what Trotsky calls him: a gray and colorless mediocrity. But as the builder of a political machine, or, if not as builder, then as master of the art of winning such a machine once opportunity offered and of utilizing it for his purposes, as a manipulator of men and a master of the art of disposing of his forces, Stalin has had few equals. Certainly, Trotsky was not one of them. All his life, when he was apart from Lenin, he proved unable to build a machine. When he entered Lenin's machine, he had no talents for taking possession of it.

If he had lived until 1946, could he have continued to call the master of the greatest state machine in history a mere "mediocrity"? Could he have continued to insist that this dictator was "lacking in initiative, originality, and daring" and "ever prone to take the path of least resistance" while Stalin was surprising his hesitant, would-be allies by making a pact with Hitler to win without war a fifth of Europe; while he was contriving to hold the same gains with Allied sanction when Hitler had broken the pact; while, all through the war and the peace which followed, he was continuing to make gains and to face his Allies with a dizzying succession of audacious *faits accomplis*?

The central problem of this book and of Stalin's career is one which Trotsky repeatedly touches on, yet leaves unsolved. It is the problem of Stalin's relation to Lenin: to Lenin's, or we may properly say Lenin's and Trotsky's Revolution, and to Lenin's Party machine. "Stalin," writes Trotsky at one point, "represents a phenomenon utterly exceptional. He is neither a thinker, a writer nor an orator. He took possession of power not with the aid of personal qualities, but with the aid of an impersonal machine. And it was not he who created the machine but the machine that created him." What was there in that machine which could create a Stalin? The author nowhere in these pages asks the question clearly or clearly answers it.

Yet there was a time, back in 1904, when Trotsky rose to the heights of brilliant prophecy, and warned Lenin that the machine the latter was creating (undemocratic, centralized, ruled and directed from above, naming professional agents to run each local organization, which nominees would in turn assemble in convention to confirm the Central Committee which had named them) — that such a machine would inevitably breed personal dictatorship.

"The organization of the Party," warned Trotsky, "will take the place of the Party itself; the Central Committee will take the place of the organization; and finally, the dictator

will take the place of the Central Committee.”

Why is it that in the present book Trotsky nowhere ventures to recall this brilliant example of scientific prophecy, so painfully verified by history? There are moments when that insight hovers on the threshold of consciousness. “In this connection,” writes Trotsky at one point, “it is rather tempting to draw the inference that future Stalinism was already rooted in Bolshevik centralism, or, more sweepingly, in the underground hierarchy of professional revolutionaries.” “*Rather tempting*” — but Trotsky refuses to be tempted.

When Trotsky and Lenin joined forces in 1917, it was on the basis of a political *quid pro quo*. Trotsky accepted once for all Lenin’s machine, and Lenin accepted Trotsky’s conception of the nature of the Russian Revolution. As Trotsky accepted Lenin’s undemocratic machine, Lenin accepted Trotsky’s no less undemocratic idea, first formulated in 1905, that the Russian Revolution might dispense with democracy and leap right over to a minority dictatorship by a single minority party acting in the name of a minority class.

An undemocratic machine to seize power and make an undemocratic revolution! That combination contained a mighty potential for totalitarianism: for a one-party dictatorship which would drain the soviets of their political content as parliaments of the working class; for a Central Committee dictatorship which would drain

the Party of its political content as forum for planning and discussion; for personal dictatorship which would drain the Central Committee of its political content as leading body of the Party. Even as Trotsky had predicted in 1904, so with the fatality of Greek tragedy did the drama unfold, until it ended for Trotsky with a pickaxe in the back of the brain.

But there was a complement to Trotsky’s warning of 1904, a warning and prophecy uttered at the same time by Lenin against Trotsky’s concept of an undemocratic revolution. Wrote Lenin against Trotsky in 1905:

“Whoever attempts to achieve socialism by any other route than that of political democracy will inevitably arrive at the most absurd and reactionary results, both political and economic.”

Also a brilliant foreseeing! But in 1917, when Lenin accepted Trotsky’s concept of the Russian Revolution and Trotsky accepted Lenin’s concept of the Party machine, they compounded each other’s errors and raised the totalitarian potential to the second power. There was a world war on, and both men had reason to hope that a spread of the Russian Revolution to all warring countries might save Russia from the consequences which each of them had foreseen by halves. But in place of the World Revolution . . . came Stalin! That is the real meaning of Trotsky’s “inevitability.” Like a cuttlefish in a cloud of ink he shies away from its implications wherever they suggest themselves in these

pages. For he approaches Stalin as a loyal Leninist and Bolshevik, which reduces him, despite his angry scorn, to a species of loyal opposition. He dare not subject Lenin's machine to a real re-examination, that machine which lent itself so easily to the "usurpation" of "the driver's seat" by a totalitarian dictator; which even "created" that dictator; which, once such a man was in the driver's seat, became the juggernaut we know. And he dare not re-examine the seizure of power by a minority party in the name of a minority class or a fraction of that class, in November 1917. Only with this in mind can we understand how he can still describe the Russian totalitarian state as "a workers' state" albeit with "monstrous bureaucratic distortions." Only thus can we understand why he says that state ownership of all property, of the means of production of goods and the means of production of ideas, ownership by the state of the food, the jobs, the bodies and the minds of its subjects, is still "a progressive force."

The real deficiency of this book lies in the unconscious limitations that Trotsky has put upon his task of re-examination of the work of a lifetime. Those limitations reduce him from

the role of a genuine critic to the role of a pretender denouncing "a usurper."

As a psychological and personal study of the dictator who was "created by the machine" and of the stratagems by which he contrived to "usurp the driver's seat," Trotsky's *Stalin* is sometimes brilliant and at all points highly informative and revealing. No one who would understand the character and actions of the man who wields greater power than any other on earth today can afford to miss this book. But those who would understand the most important problem of our time — the problem of democracy versus totalitarianism in a world that is moving everywhere towards greater collectivism and greater state intervention — will have to go beyond its pages. They provide only raw materials. For Trotsky is so contemptuous of democracy that he can think of nothing more devastating to say of the master totalitarian of today than this:

"A plebian democrat of the provincial type, armed with a rather primitive 'Marxist' doctrine — it was as such that he entered the revolutionary movement, and such in essence he remained to the very end. . . ."



THE CHECK LIST

HISTORY

MY THREE YEARS WITH EISENHOWER, by Captain Harry C. Butcher, USNR. \$5.00. *Simon and Schuster*. This is the diary kept by the naval aide to General Eisenhower in 1942-1945. The relationship between the two men was most friendly, hence the diary is filled with enormously interesting personal observations of the *Supreme Allied Commander in Europe*. Eisenhower comes out of it a modest, even shy, man, but also one of tremendous determination and diplomatic skill. On one occasion he battled with Churchill for hours on a point of strategy. "Ike said no, continued saying no all afternoon, and ended in saying no in every form of the English language." Eisenhower also disagreed with Roosevelt on unconditional surrender. In other words, he was not a yes man; yet he knew how to say "maybe," and the manner in which he made the British, the Americans and the French work together on the western front was little short of a miracle. He once said sadly, "If I could get command of a battalion and get into a bullet battle, it would all be so simple." Captain Butcher does not reveal many startling "secrets" about the conduct of the war or about any of the personalities involved; to that extent his book is rather disappointing. But as a collection of observations about a world figure by an admirer who also has an eye for colorful incidents, it makes good reading, and historians probably will consult it to get the "feel" of the people in Allied military headquarters in Europe.

WRATH IN BURMA: *The Uncensored Story of General Stilwell and International Maneuvers in the Far East*, by Fred Eldridge. \$3.00. *Double-day*. After surviving the barrage of propaganda which the War necessarily evoked, it seems that we must withstand a protracted assault of debunking before achieving some degree of balanced understanding of the hectic years of battle. In that assault, this story of the Burma campaigns is

a major foray. It follows the efforts of General Stilwell to get someone to do a little fighting against the Japanese — efforts which British imperial and Chinese domestic interests allegedly made very difficult. Chiang, it seems, sold both FDR and Chennault a bill of goods, while Wedemeyer tended to fall for Mountbatten's line. It's not quite as bald as that, and indeed the book is often impressive and revealing, but you could hardly call it even-handed.

SUITORS AND SUPPLIANTS: *The Little Nations at Versailles*, by Stephen Bonsal. \$3.50. *Prentice-Hall*. A continuation of the same author's *Unfinished Business*, this book presents more selections from the brilliant diary which Mr. Bonsal kept while serving as Colonel House's right-hand man at the Versailles Conference. Arranged topically, most of the book deals with negotiations on the Balkans and the Middle East. Mr. Bonsal's terms are largely human ones as he follows the spokesmen of a dozen national causes, listens to their pleas, and notes the treatment which the Big Four meted out to them. Beyond the spectacle, which he enjoys, and the story, which he tells with ease, he does not venture far. Between the facts of conflict and his hopes of harmony, he finds no resolution. Across the years, *Suitors and Suppliants*, with its thin, pervasive note of Wilsonian idealism, sounds more than archaic: it is saddening.

LAST CHAPTER, by Ernie Pyle. \$2.50. *Holt*. This is Ernie Pyle's last book of dispatches. It deals with the Pacific theatre where he was during the first few weeks of 1945; he was killed on Ie Shima on April 17. "Covering the Pacific War," he said, "was, for me, like learning to live in a new city." But it didn't take him long to know the soldiers and sailors — their fears, dreams, hopes, their courage and basic decencies. No one has written about the American fighting man with more warmth and under-