

Leon Trotsky

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Born: November 08, 1879 in Elisavetgrad, Russia

Died: August 21, 1940 in Mexico City, Mexico

Other Names: Bronstein, Lev Davidovich

Nationality: Russian

Occupation: Revolutionary

The Russian revolutionist Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) was a principal leader in the founding of the Soviet Union. He played an important role in the October Revolution, which brought the Bolsheviks to power; and he organized the Red Army during the ensuing civil war.

Leon Trotsky was born Lev Davidovich Bronstein near Elisavetgrad (later Kirovograd). He derived from an almost completely Russified Jewish family that lived in the province of Kherson, in the small town of Yanovka. His father, David Leontievich Bronstein, had by dint of hard labor grown fairly prosperous as a farmer, but his uncultured middle-class family lived an extremely simple life. At the age of 7 the boy was sent to a Jewish private religious school in the nearby town of Gromokla. Since he knew no Yiddish, his stay was brief and unhappy but nonetheless valuable, for he learned to read and write Russian.

Shortly after his return home, a cousin, Moisey Filippovich Shpenster, arrived at the Bronstein household to recuperate from an illness. He played the role of tutor to Lyova (Lev's nickname) and when it came time for him to return to Odessa, Lyova returned with him.

In Odessa, Lyova attended a preparatory class for an entire year. At St. Paul's Realschule he quickly overcame his early deficiencies and rose to the head of his class. Seven years in Odessa expanded the already existing differences between father and son. For some reason David Bronstein decided to have his son finish his last academic year in the nearby seaport of Nikolaev instead of in Odessa. Here Lyova had his first contacts with the Russian revolutionary movement.

Revolutionary Activities and First Exile

A relatively large concentration of old exiles of the group called Narodnaia Volia (The People's Will) lived in this small town. Lyova became acquainted with this circle through Franz Shvigovsky, a gardener who played a prominent role in a small discussion club. One member of this Narodnik group, Alexandra Sokolovskaya, considered herself a Marxist and was almost immediately opposed by the 17-year-old Lyova. He knew almost nothing of Marxist doctrine, but his ability as an orator and his intellectual prowess soon made him the focal point of the group. The more involved he became, the more his schoolwork declined, although he graduated in 1897 with first-class honors.

As news of strikes began to grow, Lyova found himself becoming more and more inclined toward Marxism. This period saw the formation of the South Russian Workers' Union. The clandestine activities of its members were for the most part harmless, but police spies successfully infiltrated the group. After an extended period of interrogation, Bronstein was exiled to Siberia for 4 years by

administrative verdict. While awaiting deportation, he first heard of V. I. Lenin and his book *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. Before leaving, Bronstein married Alexandra Sokolovskaya.

During his stay in Verkholensk, Bronstein began forming his ideas on national coordination and on centralized party leadership. In a little-known essay he composed his thoughts on the subject, and the result was an organizational scheme that practically paralleled that of the Bolsheviks, of whom he later was so critical. He also turned to literary criticism, but the young revolutionary grew restless. Urged on by his wife, he escaped after 4½ years of prison and exile.

Exile and Formulation of Theory

The name on Bronstein's false passport was Trotsky, a name that remained with him. He joined Lenin in London in October and began writing for *Iskra*. Trotsky shared his quarters with V. I. Zasluch and J. Martov and drew closer to these two than to Lenin. Only Georgi Plekhanov showed any dislike for Trotsky. The split among the *Iskra* editors was already taking shape, and Trotsky became the special focus of Plekhanov's scorn.

In July 1903 at Brussels the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party produced, instead of one party, two. Trotsky emerged as Lenin's most implacable opponent on the question of the organization of the party. Despite his early writings favoring a high degree of centralization, Trotsky sided with Martov and the Mensheviks in favoring a broader-based party. Plekhanov had sided with Lenin, but their relationship was a fragile one. When Plekhanov invited the *Iskra* board to return, Lenin broke with the editorial staff completely. Trotsky returned, but Plekhanov's dislike of him only grew. Thus began Trotsky's estrangement from the Menshevik wing of the party. No rapprochement, however, with Lenin was forthcoming.

Suspended between both factions, Trotsky came under the influence of A. L. Helfand, whose pen name was Parvus. Under this influence Trotsky adopted a theory of "permanent revolution" that called for a telescoping of the bourgeois revolution into a socialist one that would carry far beyond Russia's borders. An important basis for this concept was the recognition by Helfand, Trotsky, and Lenin that Russia, far from having been a feudal country, was an Asiatic despotism, with the consequence that Russia's cities, unlike those of the West, had not produced an advanced entrepreneurial bourgeois elite. This made it unlikely, in Trotsky's view, that a sophisticated capitalist development would occur in Russia, and thus it was unprofitable to rely on such development as a basis for revolution. Trotsky argued that the revolution should result in the immediate establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat (meaning power for its vanguard, the Communist elite). The question of whether such a "permanent" or telescoped revolution could be attempted without a great risk of reestablishing the old bureaucratic despotism under Communist leadership preoccupied the Fourth (or Unity) Party Congress in Stockholm in 1906. Lenin offered certain relative guarantees against this Asiatic restoration (no police, no standing army, no bureaucracy, to avoid turning the proletarian dictatorship into a bureaucratic despotism) and an absolute guarantee of a socialist revolution in the West to follow the establishment of Communist power in Russia.

The first news of "Bloody Sunday," the outbreak of the 1905 Revolution, found Trotsky in Geneva. After a brief respite at Parvus's home, Trotsky went to Kiev in February. With the end of those hectic days at the beginning of the year, revolutionary turmoil abated, and Trotsky, under the assumed name

of Peter Petrovich, moved in and out of the clandestine circles of St. Petersburg.

October 1905 Revolution and Second Exile

In the middle of October 1905 a general strike broke out in St. Petersburg, and Trotsky hurriedly returned to the capital from Finland. On the first day of his return he appeared at the Soviet, which had assembled at the Technological Institute. He was elected to the Executive Committee of the Soviet of St. Petersburg as the chief representative of the Menshevik wing and played the dominant role in the brief life of this new type of institution. For his part in the Revolution of 1905 Trotsky was exiled to Siberia in 1907 for life with the loss of all his civil rights. On the trip to Siberia, he decided to escape. His second exile lasted 10 years, until the February Revolution of 1917.

At the London Congress in April 1907, Trotsky maintained his position of aloofness and implored both sides to coalesce in the name of unity. For the next 7 years he lived with his second wife in Vienna, where he made the acquaintance of Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, Rudolph Hilferding, Eduard Bernstein, Otto Bauer, Max Adler, and Karl Renner. It did not take long for Trotsky to become aware of the differences between "his" Marxism and theirs. He became the editor of a Viennese paper called *Pravda*. In August 1912 he organized in Vienna a conference of all Social Democrats, hoping that this would lead to a reconciliation, but Lenin's refusal to attend was a severe disappointment. An August bloc consisting of Mensheviks, Bolshevik dissenters, the Jewish Bund, and Trotsky's followers was formed.

With the outbreak of World War I Trotsky left Vienna for Zurich in order to avoid internment. The question of the war and the Zimmerwald Conference seemed to draw Lenin and Trotsky closer together, and, conversely, Trotsky and the August bloc seemed to become less and less amicable. Parvus's stand on the war also conflicted with Trotsky's internationalism, and their friendship was ended on Trotsky's initiative.

Return to Russia

In September 1916 Trotsky was deported from France, where he had resided during the previous 2 years. On January 13, 1917, he landed in New York. By mid-March the first news of the Revolution began to arrive. He took a negative view of the new government almost immediately. Certainly his stand was firmer on this issue than Stalin's. Trotsky's differences with Lenin were indeed growing less severe. With his family, Trotsky attempted to return to Russia, but he was removed from his ship at Halifax by British authorities, who forced him to remain in Canada for an entire month. Not until May 4 did he finally arrive in Petrograd.

Trotsky assumed the leadership of the Interborough Organization, a temporary body composed of many prominent personalities opposed to the "war, Prince Lvov, and the social patriots." At the Bolshevik party's Sixth Congress in July-August, Trotsky led the entire group into Lenin's fold even though at this time he was in prison as the result of the abortive July coup. With the growth of Bolshevik strength in Soviet representation, the Petrograd Soviet elected Trotsky as its chairman on September 23. He had also been raised to Central Committee status during his prison term.

Trotsky and Lenin prodded the Bolsheviks on to revolution over the objections of such men as Lev Kamenev, Trotsky's brother-in-law, and Grigori Zinoviev, and Trotsky alone forged the "machinery of

insurrection." He scurried from meeting to meeting agitating whoever would listen. By his own estimate no more than 25,000 or 30,000 (the actual number was probably less) took part in the final coup, a testament to his organizational ability.

People's Commissar

In the Soviet government founded by Lenin after the coup, Trotsky was given the position of people's commissar for foreign affairs. He also led the Soviet delegation at the Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference. While he negotiated, Karl Radek distributed pamphlets among German soldiers designed to provoke unrest in the enemy camp.

The German demands were so extensive that the Bolshevik party split over the question of war or peace. Lenin was almost alone in wanting to accept the terms dictated by the Germans. Profound disagreement had existed between Lenin and Trotsky on the question of Brest-Litovsk, but Lenin convinced Trotsky once again to approach the Germans for terms. This time the terms were even more unfavorable, but again Lenin persuaded Trotsky to side with the peace faction. Trotsky cast the deciding vote in favor of signing the highly unfavorable Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

Although Trotsky had resigned as commissar of foreign affairs he was immediately appointed to the post of commissar for war. In that capacity he rebuilt the Red Army and directed the campaigns on four fronts during the civil war. Despite wholesale opposition throughout the Bolshevik party, he persisted in the use of former czarist officers, buttressed by a system of political commissars and terror. From a force of fewer than 10,000 reliable armed soldiers in October 1917, he had built an army numbering more than 5 million 2½ years later. He alone proved capable of imposing centralization upon a highly fragmented force.

Toward the end of the civil war in 1920, Trotsky proposed that the machinery for military mobilization be employed for the organization of civilian labor. Civilian labor was to be subjected to military discipline, and the army was to be reorganized on the basis of productive units. Lenin wholeheartedly supported Trotsky's suggestions. Trotsky's strong-arm methods in shaping the army and in forcing industrial production created a large number of bitter enemies who were soon to be heard from.

Opposition to Stalin

From Lenin's death in 1924 until Trotsky's exile in 1928, Trotsky fought a long, hard, and losing battle against Stalin, who cultivated the many enemies that Trotsky had made as a revolutionary. Despite the fact that Lenin in his last testament seemed to favor Trotsky over Stalin and even had proposed removing Stalin from power, Trotsky proved no match for Stalin. The plethora of positions that Stalin had attained, some important and some not so important but all with patronage, strengthened his position and undermined the power of his opposition. In the final analysis, Trotsky had only his personal brilliance and the army as bases for power, the latter without its crucial political control apparatus. Stalin not only controlled a variety of organizations, but he skillfully appealed to the class interest of the new bureaucratic elite and decisively asserted his claim to Lenin's mantle at the funeral of the dead founder and in the *Foundations of Leninism*, published in early 1924. Trotsky did not bother to attend Lenin's funeral.

Exile and Assassination

Trotsky allied himself with the so-called left opposition of Kamenev and Zinoviev; but Stalin successfully opposed him by breaking up the alliance, aided by Nikolai Bukharin and the right wing of the party. After his defeat Trotsky was expelled from the party, and in 1928 he was exiled to Alma-Ata in Central Asia. Forced to flee the Soviet Union, he went first to Turkey, then to France and Norway, and finally to Mexico. Throughout his sojourn he continued to attack Stalin, returning to his early critical themes of bureaucratic centralism and one-man dictatorship. Implacable as he was in his criticism, Trotsky did not draw on the most powerful polemical weapon available to him: that the cause of socialism had been lost in an "Asiatic restoration," through the consolidation of a new bureaucratic despotism under Stalin. That would have meant the rejection of Soviet [communism](#) and the party. Trotsky, unable to do so, could attack only Stalin and his policies.

On August 20, 1940, Trotsky was mortally wounded in Mexico City by an ice ax wielded by Ramon Mercador, a Soviet assassin talked into this crime, according to one account, by his mother, who held the Order of Lenin for masterminding assassinations for the Soviet secret police.

Further Readings

- Trotsky wrote his memoirs in exile, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (1930; trans. 1930). His vivid *History of the Russian Revolution* (3 vols., 1931-1933; trans., 3 vols., 1932) recounts his role in the Revolution. Isaac Deutscher's superb biographical trilogy will probably remain the standard work on Trotsky for many years: *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879-1921* (1954); *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929* (1959); and *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929-1940* (1963).
- Countless studies of the Russian revolutionary movement and the Revolution exist. Among the best are William Henry Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921* (1935); Adam B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks: The Intellectual and Political History of the Triumph of Communism in Russia* (1965); Robert V. Daniels, *Red October: The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917* (1967); and Richard Pipes, ed., *Revolutionary Russia: A Symposium* (1968).
- Recommended for general background are Edward Hallett Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia* (9 vols., 1951-1971); Lionel Kochan, *Russia in Revolution, 1890-1918* (1966); and Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-67* (1968).

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